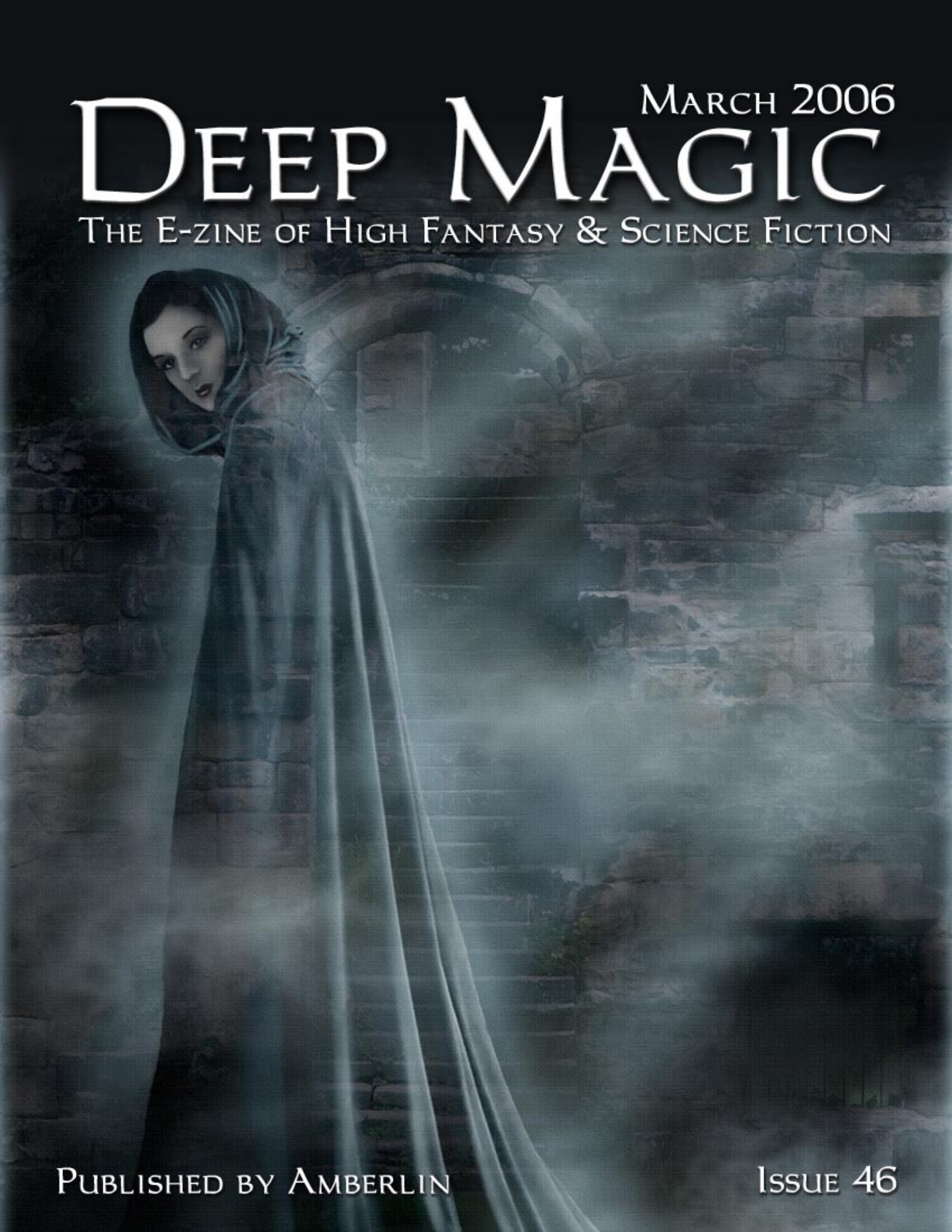

March 2006
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
Published by Amberlin
Issue 46

Founders

Chief Editor – Jeremy Whitted
Managing Editor – Jeff Wheeler
Contributing Editor – Brendon Taylor

Senior Staff

Tech Geek/Kenatos Lead – Steven Richards
Book Reviews Manager – Matthew Scott Winslow
Copyediting Manager – JW Wrenn
Submissions Manager – Keri Stevenson

Staff

Art Coordinator - Nikki Goethals
Book Reviewer – Rochelle Buck
Book Reviewer – Sean T. M. Stiennon
Book Reviewer – Ida Clinkscales
Copyeditor – Mark Reeder
Copyeditor – Amy R. Butler
Copyeditor – Joel Brown
Copyeditor - Tamar Zeffren
Copyeditor - Robyn A. Hay
PocketDM Layout/Kenatos Lead – Mike Loos

Submissions Review – All Staff
Graphic Design – Jeremy Whitted
Art Director – Jeff Wheeler
Associate Art Director – Reuben Fox
Marketing – Jeff Wheeler
Legal – Brendon Taylor

Many thanks to our volunteer proofreaders:
A. M. Stickel
Isaac Nydegger
L. D. Reece

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net
Feedback: http://www.deep-magic.net/contact
Forums: http://www.deep-magic.net/forums

Cover: "*Melancholy Kate*" by Shannon Hilson

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

All Content copyright © 2006
Amberlin, Inc., an Idaho Nonprofit Corporation

Table of Contents

Note From the Editor 3
Lamp Post Awards Voting 4
Writing Challenge 5
Fantasy Short: *Metal Fatigue* 16
Interview: Joshua Bilmes 17
Fantasy Short: *The Woods of Porden* 20
Featured Artist: Shannon Hilson 21
Amberlin Books Publications 23
Fantasy Short: *Keeping the Peace* 24
Deep Magic Looks at Books 25

Subscribe to Deep Magic!

Would you like to know when the next issue of Deep Magic is released? Sign up for our mailing list for free. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers.

If you would like to support Deep Magic, consider purchasing a membership. Details can be found here on our website.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please let us know, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

March 2006

Spring is just around the corner, and I must say, it's coming none too soon. Those with children can understand how torturous winter can be. My kids are stir-crazy; in turn, my wife and I are just crazy. But spring is almost here, and things are looking up. I've been a bit grumpy lately (for dumb reasons I won't bring up), but it's nice to have *Deep Magic* to fall back on. Some months I'm just not in the mood to put the issue together, but once I get going, it feels so good. I guess all this first-paragraph rambling is to admit that *Deep Magic* is, among other things, therapeutic.

No big news to announce this month, though in the coming months we hope to have more to reveal. I can say that the writing challenge from January—and some of those entries are published this month—was our most successful ever. We had far more entries than normal, and many, many fine ones. I couldn't even publish all the ones I wanted to. Thanks to every person who participated. Even if yours didn't make it, it was read and appreciated.

I think you'll like our story selection this month, too—each tale uniquely delightful. To complement the stories, we have an article featuring literary agent, Joshua Bilmes, that is definitely worth a read for all you aspiring authors. In addition, Shannon Hilson opens the issue with one of my favorite covers, *Melancholy Kate*. I'm sure you'll agree that it's a beautiful piece of artwork.

One more plug for the Lamp Post Awards: vote! I've extended the voting to mid-March to give readers more time. The more votes we get, the better. In the April issue, you will make a final vote, and the awards will be announced in the May issue. I just enjoy dragging things out...

So again, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to read *Deep Magic*. And, for those of you silently wishing to know, our download numbers are rising significantly after a long period of staying steady. This bodes well for the future of the e-zine. Keep downloading, and, if you like it, please subscribe (doing so through our forums). Paid subscriptions allow us to pay our authors and artists and keep *Deep Magic* alive, not to mention lively.

Thanks again, and welcome to spring!

Sincerely,

Jeremy Whitted
Chief Editor
Deep Magic

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

The Lamp Post Awards

The first round of voting for the 2006 Lamp Post Awards has begun. On this page is the list of nominees for each category. Go here to vote. The voting page will have links to the issues each story/artwork appears in. The fantasy stories are split into two groups. You can choose up to three stories from each fantasy group (six total), up to three science fiction stories, and up to three pieces of cover art. Drop by the forums if you have any questions. Voting for this round will end mid-March.

VOTE HERE

Fantasy Short Story

A Sorcerous Mist by Simon Kewin
Alternate Path by L.S. King
Breath of the Kraken by A. Creg Peters
Call of Blood by Jonathan Ruland
Carrying Souls by M. Thomas
Collection by Steven Richards
Divining Borders by David McGillveray
Gothar's Mountains by Robyn A. Hay
Imoen's Arrow by Robert Shell
Infestation by Ian Creasey
Jodhin by Q.S. Archer
Out of the Dark by Scott Clements
Silent Past by Bill Snodgrass
Stone Games by Keri Stevenson
Sun and Sky by Amy M. Smith
Tale of the Seal by Anne Doucette
The Fall by David Eland
The Golden Needle by Vera Searles
The Ravenmaster by Jeff Wheeler
The Saintly Fianche of Malitane by Amy Butler

SciFi Short Story

Contagion by Keith Robinson
Deletion by Mike Loos
Hunting with Flinteye by Sean T.M. Stiennon
Knitting with Water by Nigel Atkinson
Present Historic by Nyki Blatchley
Soul-Tied Twist by Chris Przybyszewski
The Final Machine by Simon Kewin
The Lost Hemingway by Mark Reeder
Unless a Seed Dies by David Eland
With Eyes Open by Michael P. Dunn

Cover Art

Issue 25 - June 2004
Issue 26 - July 2004
Issue 28 - September 2004
Issue 30 - November 2004
Issue 31 - December 2004
Issue 32 - January 2005
Issue 34 - March 2005
Issue 36 - May 2005
Issue 43 - December 2005

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

March 2006 Writing Challenge
Entries due Apr 10, 2006

Do you have any recurring dreams or nightmares? They are often a strong source of feelings and creativity. Use a dream or nightmare you have had as the inspiration for a story. Try and re-create the vividness that made it memorable to you. But it should be set in a fantasy or science fiction world. Keep it to 1000 words or less.

Selections from the January 2005 Challenge

A Mongol On Mars
Silent Pain
The Amazing Trapeze Fairy
The Stewardship of Dairah
The Trembling Cheek

The above stories were selected from the January challenge, which was to create a short story about a vow.

Don't forget the February challenge due Mar 10:

We all have favorite authors. There is something about that author's "voice" that makes them unique, that draws us into their words, that brings us back to buy their latest work in hardcover when it is released. Your writing challenge for this month is to mimic your favorite author's voice. Do not steal their characters, their setting, or any of their plots. Use their voice to describe a scene. Pick apart the craft of how they make dialogue and describe characters or a scene. But do not write the next epic novel for them. Keep it to 1000 words.

A Mongol On Mars

By A.M. Stickel

Negan Naran placed his gloved palm firmly against the Face of Mars. He liked having this final proof of its solidity, but hated to admit how much aerial photos of this landmark reminded him of his own father, Cheren.

Respectful of his father, Negan had secretly resented the stern man's superstitious nature. Yet, he had Cheren to thank for his own release into rationality, and the ultimate triumph of being part of the Golden Eagle Mars Mission.

A single fateful day had exiled Cheren Naran's eldest son from his beloved boyhood home and familiar herds in Huvsgul Province. "The spirit of a great snow leopard came to me in a dream," said his father, "and made me vow to send you to school. Seek your destiny in Ulaanbaatar. Your mother agrees that I am right, so do not try to get her to change my mind. Promise me!"

"Yes, Father." There was never any questioning of Cheren's commands.

So Negan had traded his traditional del for European-style clothes, the wide-open grasslands for crowded city streets, and his large, close-knit family for the strict household of his uncle, Doctor Zutan Sechen, his mother's brother. He had put aside the bittersweet memories of the deer-crossed, grassy valleys where he was raised, its winters so cold that even the thick-furred wolves were known to freeze solid, as did men's unprotected eyes.

"Almost Mars-cold, but not quite…" Negan startled himself, glad he had thought to turn down his intercom for the moment.

Leaning his back against the Face, Negan let his helmet-protected gaze wander across a place seemingly bereft of all the elements: earth, air, fire and water. Still, he experienced the kinship of rusty Mars with his barren Gobi. Would there ever come the mysterious low roar, followed by a white fog of unknown origin as sometimes happened in that Mongolian desert? Not in his lifetime, he was sure.

No, nothing stirred. His two fellow explorers, a Russian and an American, were just out of sight taking vital measurements for analyses of the eerie environment. Instead of a sturdy pony, his mission responsibility (which the group had dubbed the Marsmobile) was behind a distant boulder the size of two gers. He longed for the feel of felt under his fingers, the stable fragility of ger walls, the yurt shape reminiscent of his plasteel dome-home on Mars.

A solid, stocky young man, Negan had never experienced the freedom of movement, the buoyancy, Mars' low gravity provided, although he had come close as a child on horseback. But he had known the equivalent solitude, both as a young herder and, later, as a foreign scholar in Beijing. He was resented both for his aptitude and his attitude, being more private than the few other Mongolian students in his classes.

"Val and I are about ready to wind up our exploration of this Great Wall and head back to base camp, Ghengis," came the faint voice of xenobiologist Leila Hunt, teasing him as usual.

Negan shrugged it off, turned up his 'com volume, and answered. "Roger, Leila, but I'm surprised Captain Rostov is that anxious for a share of my rehydrated mutton stew."

"It wouldn't be so bad if you'd learned to season properly," groused Val Rostov.

"Sorry, I left all of my extra seasonings back on Earth, Val. Your best bet is to discover a

salt deposit from that ocean you say used to be here."

"I may skip the stew this time around, and get right on the spectral analysis of my piece of the Face. If it's what I think it is, maybe we can celebrate with a more potent potion than our reclaimed still water."

"I took a few swabs for culture, but I doubt they were worth the effort," said Leila. "Nope, I've hardly earned my daily bread today."

The two scientists, samples stowed in their hip-packs, joined Negan, and then all three loped toward the spot where they'd left the Marsmobile.

Reaching the boulder, they found the unexpected. Leila, always the first to speak, rounded on Negan. "All right, I give. What did you do with it? If you tell me, I even promise not to call you 'Ghengis' anymore. This is not funny!"

Negan didn't know how to answer her, except to say, "We must have lost our bearings." He tapped his wrist-tracker. "The homing beacon is dead too."

"Negan, Leila, let's keep our heads. I have a feeling there's more to this Face of Mars than we thought. I'm detecting a magnetic flux, which could account for our disorientation, and…"

Before he could finish, they heard a burst of static and a high-pitched whine. Reflexively, the three reached to switch off their 'coms.

Negan, Leila and Val turned and stared hard at the Face. His head swam at the red shimmering light that reached out to encompass the others. While they stood mesmerized, he stepped backward towards where the Marsmobile should have been. Despite the cumbersome suit he wore, he moved with the grace, not only of someone in lighter gravity, but also used to bulky clothing, until his back encountered the expected sensation of resting against the huge treads of their transport. Stepping forward silently, Negan reached for Leila's gloved left hand and Val's right. They jumped, startled.

As if gentling two ponies, Negan drew the other two with him, but did not glance behind him. Once they were safely aboard the Marsmobile, and had repressurized its cab, helmets were removed, and lively discussion of the anomaly began. Back at base camp, it continued long after they'd finished the stew, which everyone agreed tasted much better than expected.

When Negan finally slept he dreamt of Cheren going hunting, his golden eagle perched upon his outstretched arm, a smile of contentment on his face, proud of a promise kept. And he knew from this sign that they would indeed find their answer.

Silent Pain

By Jenni Mills

Christine plucked the last of the sweet-smelling cherries from the tree and placed it into her worn wooden bucket that was only half full. It would have been heaven to sigh at the sparse amount of fruit nestled in the dry oak vessel. She would not sigh—to do so would break her oath. Even the whisper of breath released from tired lips was considered a violation of the strict regulations of the vow. Even if there was not a soul for miles who would catch the gentle vibration from her throat on their ears, the Sisters of Gargolth would know the vow had been broken. Instead of allowing the sigh to escape, Christine closed her eyes, breathed deeply and prayed. The Goddess would feel her anxiety and bring forth more fruit on the tree in several days. She was sure of it. She was relying on it.

Emptying the bucket into the press, the short, dark-haired woman concentrated on her task. To make the sherry, the juice must first be released. At least these cherries were juicier than the last. As she wound the press down, the dark red liquid oozed from their split skins. One more turn of the press and it was as tight as it could go. Christine rolled her eyes—there was still not enough juice. She threw all her weight behind the handle and pushed once more. There may have been just a trickle more of the sweet nectar; however, the cost was high.

Her hands shook as Christine looked down at the open blisters on her palms. She wanted to wail. Tears spilt from her eyes, and her mouth opened in a silent gesture of pain. Even then, not a sound escaped her faithful lips.

When Garred returned, he would turn the press for her as he had done for fourteen years. Just one more day of silence and Garred would return. Christine had missed her husband so much in this silent month of torture. One more day without muttering a sound and the Sisters would return her husband to her.

Even as they carted him away and she longed to yell at him, and curse him for leaving her, she had been bound to silence. Over the noise of the Sisters' cart wheels he had called to her, promising never to gamble again if she would just keep the vow of silence that Sisters of Gargolth had bound her to. It was a showing of her faith for her husband, the only thing that would release him from the punishment of death.

On her knees that night, praying as the Sisters had taught her, and alone in the house, Christine was horrified to hear a loud racket coming from the side of the house. She opened the bedroom window and looked down into the shadowy yard. The view there nearly stopped her heart. Johno the lumberjack was so drunk he could barely stand, and clumsily wielding his axe, he made large chunks of the cherry tree fly off into the darkness. He sang loudly as he worked at ravaging her livelihood. If she just cried out she could stop him from swinging the axe once more into the trembling trunk of the tree.

Tears once again blurring her sight, Christine rattled the sash of the windows, trying to get his attention. Johno's rambunctious chorus drowned her out. Looking wildly about the room, she laid her hands on a bed pan and banged loudly on it with a brush. Johno looked up in her direction, waved merrily to her, and dealt the tree several more blows.

Christine leapt down the stairs in her flowing white night gown, ignoring the curlers that fell as she ran. By the time she reached him it was too late. The cherry tree was in ruins. Johno

looked at her with surprise as she emerged violently from the side door and hammered her fists into his shoulder. It was only then that he came to his senses and realised what he had done. Instantly he was sober.

"Don't you say a word, Christine, don't you utter a sound," he said, holding her fists. "Keep your faith for Garred, and we'll see him at sunrise. He can deal with me then," he said before fleeing into the night, leaving her in silent pain on the lawn.

She was still lying there when the horizon brightened and the sun sent its first golden rays into the sky. She was still lying there when the Sisters of Gargolth wheeled their noisy cart into the lane.

The eldest of the white-clad nuns lifted her from the ground and smiled into her puffy eyes.

"Your faith is strong, you have kept your vow and you will be rewarded. Remember, Christine, the Goddess works in mysterious ways," she said softly and led her to the arms of her husband.

Through her stream of tears, Christine could see more of the villagers approaching. They carried buckets and bowls filled with cherries.

The wife of the sherry maker had known of the other cherry trees in the village. The farmers' wives used them to make cherry pie and cherry delight chocolates. Christine and her hard-working husband had always been too proud to ask for the fruit. In years gone by, there had always been just enough to make up the orders that kept them from poverty. In the baskets carried by the villagers, there was enough fruit to make much more than the orders they barely managed to fill. Johno lead them, carrying two small but healthy plants.

"I'm so sorry for what I did. I know these young trees will take a while to bear fruit, but the women folk have promised to help in the years between," he said, humbly bowing his head.

Christine looked into her husband's bemused face and said the first words she had uttered in 30 days.

"I love you," was all she said.

The Amazing Trapeze Fairy

By E. J. Hayes

Well, get out of the way, then, you strutting peacock. I haven't got all day. I'm on an important errand, see, and if these crooked legs of mine fold, you'll have elephant dung all over your fine clothes.

The way folks act, you'd think I've nothing better to do than empty their slop buckets and scrub the stains from their sheets (Lord, the things I've seen) and scoop up elephant manure.

But I'm clever, see, cleverer than you think. This dungcart? It's just a front. I've a promise to keep, and I intend on keeping it.

In the meantime, there's always more dung with my name on it. Around here, it's the well-formed folks who tame lions and vanish rabbits into thin air and do fearless handstands on the backs of galloping white horses. Stunted cripples get the elephant's rear end.

You won't hear me complain, though. If them's the rules of this world, then that's okay with me. Because there she is, slim and gay in that sparkly trapeze costume, and there's something about her radiance that starts that little ache in my chest, just there. If hauling elephant dung keeps me close to her, then keep munching on that hay, Jumbo, because I'll haul until you're lion-meat.

Lord, this cart's getting heavy, but I drag it past her like I'm as tall and strong as the handsome fire-eater with his ill-meaning hand on her shoulder. Sometimes, she looks at me, and I watch to see if this is one of those times. These days, an instant of her smile is all I get, as her gaze flashes on past me to someone else. If I miss it, I might not get another one for a long time.

When we were young, it was different. She used to laugh with me, and bring me little scraps of bacon and chocolate, which she'd poke between the bars. Her little pet, she called me, and I swear nothing ever made me happier. She grew taller and more shapely, and I grew neither; well-to-do folks murmured at her beauty, while they still exclaimed in disgust at the sight of me, but it didn't matter so long as she was my friend. Finally, she got her own act – *Marvel At The Amazing Trapeze Fairy!* – and I'd hunch in my cage in the dark and listen to the applause, and dream that one day I'd see her fly.

But soon, the old lady with the beard died, and then that goggle-eyed fellow who spoke in gibberish – *He's A Prophet Of The LORD!* – broke his chain and took off, and the *Hideous Alligator Man!* got better. A freakshow of one isn't worth much to anybody. So they let me out, and before long, someone made the dwarf—manure connection. Now, I could watch her trapeze act every night, and I swear she flew like the prettiest bird you ever saw.

She didn't have much time for me anymore. Sunrise to dusk, she'd practice or perform, and she'd fall asleep in tears, too exhausted to notice me hunkered in the dark corner of her tent, waiting for her. I didn't like the way they used her. The way the trapeze master beat her when she made a mistake. The way men stared at her with lust in their eyes.

My cage's bars had been of iron, but hers were just as real, and I vowed that one day, I'd set her free.

I took to following her, just to make sure she was all right.

Once, I watched the lion tamer's apprentice with his hands on her behind the chow tent. I couldn't tell if she was happy with him or not, but the sight boiled my blood. When the lions

made a meal of that same lad a while later, no one made anything of it.

Feeding the lions is my job, see. A hungry beast don't take well to being tamed, and those lions hadn't tasted meat for a week. Told you I was clever, didn't I?

For a while, I was convinced she was safe. Then one night I found her, bruised and crying in her tent, her face cut and bleeding. Two men had done it, she said, though she wouldn't say who or why. I begged her to escape with me. We'd go far away, I said, where no one would be able to harm her, and we'd live together, just she and I. She turned her face away, but not before I recognised the expression on her face.

Disgust normally washes off me like elephant dung, but that night I sat alone in the rain and sobbed, like a little boy who's never heard the word *freak* ringing in his ears.

I don't sleep in the corner of her tent anymore. I sleep with the magician's rabbits, where it's warm, and where no one will chase me away. But I still watch over her, when I can, and I'm watching her now as I drag this dungcart past her feet.

They all think they own her. Even from down here, I can see the fire-eater stroking her pretty hair. She's smiling at him, but that's not important. Mixing the fuel for the torches is another of my jobs. The punters'll warm their hands by a fine blaze tonight.

And later, I'll curl up in the warm straw with a rabbit in my arms, and dream that she'll be mine. I'll unlock her pretty cage, and she'll fly off on fairy wings, free as the air. And then, she'll come back to me.

The Stewardship of Dairah

By Brenna Hamersley

The ewer stood upon the altar, with a white veil nearby. My gaze kept traveling to it, behind the form of the High Steward, whose right palm rested upon my forehead as he blessed me in the Ancient Language.

I'd prepared for this day nearly all my life, even before I entered the Academy of Stewards at the age of twelve; yet now, as the moment approached which would culminate my years of effort, I felt more uncertain than ever before. Was I worthy of such a position? I knew I wasn't. Yet more forces than just the Great Father had pushed me to this moment, and I wondered *why*. Why should the daughter of a glassblower become a Stewardess? Why would anyone believe me to have the talent for such an existence, denying unnecessary pleasures, being devoted entirely to the honoring of the Great Father, Dairah?

I admit I was blessed by the Great Father with a high tolerance for inhibition, thanks to the efforts of my parents, who did their best to deny me all that I didn't need as a child. For six years I trained in the ways of the Stewards, learning the Ten Great Virtues: love, faith, righteousness, temperance, modesty, truth, kindness, peace, joy, and most importantly, obedience: to the Stewards and, more so, to Dairah. Due to daily studies of the Word of Dairah, I could quote many passages of the Holy Scriptures, answer all 1,572 catechisms, and repeat the twelve pledges of the Stewards.

There was a difference, though, between *knowing* those things and *applying* them. Therein lay my dilemma, I realized as I stood there by the altar, with hundreds of people watching the ceremony in which I'd become a Stewardess, unless I backed out. I had no doubt I knew what I needed to take the Sacred Vows; I had doubts about my ability to follow through with the application of the vows. And it was a most serious transgression to break vows made to Dairah.

The High Steward Gazal finished his chant, dropped his hand from my forehead, and turned me to face the congregation, which was compiled of other Stewards and neophytes, and a few faces from outside the Academy. I recognized my parents, whom I hadn't seen more than once per year since I'd been enrolled, and next to them were vaguely familiar faces I knew were my older siblings.

"On this day," said Gazal, his voice deep and reverberating, "we gather here to witness the inauguration of Neophyte Sarra into the Stewardship of the Great Father of Eyajin. She has received the blessing of the Most High God, and I now baptize her in the Name of Dairah, signifying the cleansing which He has bestowed upon her with His most gracious and merciful hand."

I heard him lift the ewer from the altar, and then, with a brief murmur in the Ancient Language, he poured the water on my uncovered head. I closed my eyes as it cascaded down my braided hair, my forehead, my cheeks, my shoulders…. When the rivulets ceased to move, the High Steward spoke again. "Thus Sarra has been baptized, as the Great Father commands in His Word. Now, child," he said, addressing me, "kneel at the altar."

I turned and dropped to my knees, pressing my hands together in front of my heart. Gazal picked up the veil from the altar and placed it upon me; as soon as it was secured I bowed my head, awaiting his next instructions.

"Sarra, daughter of Jidar, examine your heart carefully before you speak the Sacred Vows, for to break one is death and an eternity in the Depths." He paused, and I closed my eyes once more.

Great Father Dairah, please show me if this is wrong, if I am not meant for Your service in this manner. Squelch my doubts if this is indeed the path You have chosen for me. My stomach seemed to contract as I waited some sign of His answer.

None had come when Gazal spoke again. "If you've chosen this life, repeat these words: *I, Sarra, daughter of Jidar, and servant of the Most High God of Eyajin, do take these Sacred Vows, consecrating me into His service forever in this life and the next*."

I opened my mouth to speak, but no sound came forth. I swallowed, fighting the fear that crept over my being; yet still, my tongue remained mute.

"Sarra?" asked Gazal in a quiet voice, so none of the congregation could hear. "Have you chosen the Stewardship…or do you decline?"

My breath caught. I'd spent years of my life working for this moment, dedicating myself to it, listening to others tell me that I would be a Stewardess if I worked harder, if I listened more and spoke less, if I crushed my own will and embraced Dairah's will instead…. Had all that effort been in vain?

Only you can choose. The thought leapt into my mind, and it took me a moment to grasp it. *Only me*. I thought back to my time at the Academy. Had I only done what I'd done in forced subservience?

No…I want *to serve Dairah. I know not another way of life, nor do I wish to.*

In those words I found my answer. I took a deep breath and found my throat open again. "I, Sarra, daughter of Jidar, and servant of the Most High God of Eyajin, do take these Sacred Vows…"

I hesitated; then completed the ceremony. "I vow in the eyes of all herein as my witness: to obey always the command of Dairah; to set myself apart from the life I lived before; to honor always the Great Father; to live my life in righteousness; to uphold the Stewardship of Dairah forever in Eyajin and beyond. This I vow solemnly and willingly, in Dairah's holy Name. Amen."

Thus I entered into the Stewardship of Dairah.

The Trembling Cheek

By Luke J. Maucione

I shouldn't have been picking my lip. I know it's a simple thing and not a big deal most of the time, but when it's your wedding and you're all ceremonied up, it just isn't right.

The priest inclined his head in my direction. I was supposed to say something now, wasn't I? Something about bonding for life, death is not the end, cherish the something or other.

I withdrew my nail and cleared my throat. His eyes bore into mine as I looked toward my future better half.

"My fires will always burn for you and I shall cherish…the bonds of our life," I managed weakly. She smiled at me serenely and tilted her head to the side in a playful fashion.

The priest moved to her and recited the next verse.

Whew! Another one gone. Just how many of these sayings were there? It seemed like an age since we had started this thing. What were vows good for anyhow? We could be dead tomorrow, fodder for some encroaching evil knight and his merry band. Then what good were vows? Of course if they got her, that would mean I'd get her stuff. But then again, if I was the one out, she'd get all my favorite things: the crown of Argus, the emerald staff of the Red Mages, or that awesome emerald trident left by the ugly guy who thought he was god's gift to merfolk. Did I really have to give that up?

This was not a good time to be thinking of these things. I loved her, right? Nothing could get in our way. I can still picture her strolling lazily around the meadow, the flock diving this way and that. She was an incredible fighter, and her rippling muscles were a sight to see. And her hair? Just the most perfect blend of flaming crimson and white I'd ever seen.

I stole a glimpse at her backside just then. I knew I shouldn't have, but I did. She caught me of course. She knew me well. Her retaliation almost knocked me onto the priest, but I was stable enough. They didn't call me the King of the West Vale for nothing, you know.

The priest moved back in my direction. Oh boy, he was gonna make me say something else, wasn't he?

"The Vow of the Revenge, my sire," he said. Amazingly, it came to me.

"I will suffer your succor and vanquish the foe with most heated vengeance and despair." That actually sounded good. But wait a moment, what if the vanquishing meant certain death? Was I really ready for that kind of commitment? When you think about it, the possibility of death by revenge isn't all that appealing. Then again, most of the time, we get to dictate the battle. Top of the food chain and all that.

"And now, our final vow," began the man again. Just who is this vowsayer anyway? Does he get a special pass on our revenge because he's doing the marriage? Is he exempt from the vanquishing?

"You, Sire and Queen, do you promise to hold the bonds of loyalty, through the dark years and the light, through war and peace…"

I never got this part. What do we have to do with war and peace, anyway? We don't start wars; heck, I don't even want any part of them. Yet, somehow, whenever there's a dispute over land or wealth, guess who gets blamed?

"…and do you swear to uphold the revenge and exact the vengeance of the family upon

your foes, till death claims you?"

Wow, this was the heavy part. She turned toward me and tilted her head again, only this time there was no humor in her expression. No time now. There would be flames soon if I didn't act.

Then it came to me. She and I were like the perfect hunt. We worked together to track and chase our affections and then corralled them with hard work and aggressive action. Yeah, that made more sense.

"Your cheek is trembling…" she teased.

"No way," I whispered and then realized her mischievous intent. I knew from then I loved her, despite all those damned vows!

"I do," I nearly shouted.

The priest raised his eyebrows and then addressed the crowd.

"I now pronounce you, Lord and Lady Dragon, lifemates!" The crowd roared ferociously, but I hardly heard them. My eyes were on my future.

"So what do you want to do now that we're lifemates, my lord," she purred.

I licked my lips eagerly.

"Eat the priest."

Metal Fatigue

By Stephen Couch

Feiza had a special ritual she performed whenever she was out of a job and hurting for work. It didn't involve magic; no augury or divination was required. Instead, the ritual was based on the fact that Fate ruled the world, and that Fate also had an especially cruel sense of humor.

She walked down the street to the inn, hearing the raucous lunchtime crowd as she approached. The sun hadn't even reached its apex and already they were breaking out the drinking songs.

Shouldering her way through the mass of people, she reached the bar and placed her order. The landlord nodded, stood on tiptoe to scan over the heads of the crowd, and pointed out a corner where a free table stood.

Feiza began fighting through the throng once again (and wonderful, they were singing the song about the centaur, that one could go on for *hours*) until reaching her table. The varnish was pitted from hundreds of games of mumblety-peg, and the chair had one leg shorter than the others, but any port...

She took in the crowd herself, seeing mostly laborers and merchants, with the occasional bit of finery flashing here and there. The place looked like good pickings to make the ritual work.

A dozen more verses of the centaur song later and her meal arrived, the house specialty—veal potpie. Feiza leaned in, letting the steam waft up to her nose, savoring the scents. She hadn't had a calf-pie in months. The smell of it was making her stomach growl and the saliva flow.

. . . when rarified citizens like the Sandalwoods made an offer, it didn't matter if you were employed elsewhere or not; from that moment, you were working for them.

She picked up her knife and fork and poised them over the earthenware bowl, ready to break the crust and release even more heady aromas into the air. The first bite: succulent, tender meat forked with chunks of potato and tomato...paradise.

She was dipping her fork towards the flaky, buttery crust when a man stepped up to the table and cleared his throat. "Excuse me...Feiza Corbie?"

Feiza stared at the potpie a second longer, knowing she wouldn't taste it until it had grown cold, and put her utensils back on the table.

Still, at least the ritual had worked once again.

"Yes?" The man before her was dressed neatly, but nothing too fancy; a servant, representing someone unwilling to leave the safe bubble of Northside.

He gave a short bow. "My name is Booth. I'm here on behalf of the Sandalwood family to offer you a job. You're not currently employed, are you?"

Just a formality—when rarified citizens like the Sandalwoods made an offer, it didn't matter if you were employed elsewhere or not; from that moment, you were working for them.

"I should be able to squeeze them into my schedule," Feiza said, standing.

Booth allowed a small twitch at the corner of his mouth before continuing, "Shall we go,

continued on page 27

Interview
Joshua Bilmes

Joshua Bilmes is from JABberwocky Literary Agency. Clients include: Charlaine Harris, Elizabeth Moon, Arkham House, which publishes HP Lovecraft, Simon Green, Tanya Huff, Brandon Sanderson, and Tobias Buckell

Q: Tell us the story of how you became a literary agent?
In high school, I started writing letters every month to Stan Schmidt at *Analog*, critiquing each issue. Betsy Mitchell, now editor in chief at Del Rey, was his associate editor back then, so she was reading all these letters along with Stan. When she left *Analog* to join Baen Books in the early 80's, she decided to bring me on as a freelance reader doing reports for Baen. When I graduated college, my first job offer was at a literary agency. I've been an agent for twenty years and have owned my own agency for twelve years.

Q: Where do you (as an agent) fit into the publishing cycle?
The first thing, especially these days, is that I am probably the first one who looks at something from a new writer. When I've found a new client, I'll often work with the author editorially to get their manuscript the best it can be, then take it to publishers and sell it for the author. Then, once a book is sold, there are zillions of things an agent might do. These include keeping on top of everything with the publisher, selling foreign rights or subsidiary rights to the book, guiding the author's career, giving them advice on ways to promote or support their own book, and even looking over royalty statements to be sure nothing is missing.

Q: How do you divide your time between your established clients and new authors?
There really is no single answer to that question. One thing about being an agent is you don't know what you'll be doing on any given day. You'll check e-mail and there will be a piece of news for one client, and in another e-mail, a client is having a crisis. The business isn't reactive, but there's enough of that element at times. Agents are always looking for new authors, though. Every successful writer has a career arc, and established authors aren't always on the upside on that. And since people don't live forever, agents need to find new writers all the time. Agents are getting pickier about looking for new authors these days. My assistant spends more time looking than I do personally, but I would never say that I am so busy with established clients that I'm too busy to find new ones.

Q: What are some of the typical mistakes authors make when contacting agents?
In terms of newer authors, Mistake #1 is going too long in your query letter. Never take more than one page for a query. I don't do that myself when marketing manuscripts by even my most established authors with long track records. I always keep everything to one page. Mistake #2 is perhaps talking only about the manuscript to the exclusion of talking about yourself. Good queries have a balance of information about you and the book. Mistake #3 is that query letters aren't just puff pieces. Authors aren't third party observers, or neutral, so don't throw in lots of

adjectives praising your own work.

Q: What is the best part about being an agent? The worst part?
The books I sell are like my children to me. The best part is really like giving birth to an infant. Finding a new author, finding that first sale, breaking into the market – that's the best part. And for all the success that some of my clients can have, there is still a special satisfaction about getting a foot in the door for someone new.

The worst part? Personally, I consider bookselling to be a retail business. It's about reaching individual readers to buy individual books in a bookstore. That's where it all starts out. It's all about the people who make the decision to buy a book and recommend it to others. Sadly, publishers don't have a lot of time to be in the bookstore or focus efforts to buy your book the way Kraft or Coca Cola spend trying to get you to buy their product in a grocery store. Large publishing conglomerates can have one person selling an entire list to Barnes & Noble or Borders. I really wish that there would be more of a realization towards getting people to buy books, or where they are selling and not selling. Because of this, I can also get frustrated with clients who don't recognize that they need to pick up the slack and visit bookstores when opportunity permits. It's important to their careers.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the publishing industry (especially for genre fiction), and do these trends affects authors, agents, and publishers?
A lot of so-called trends are just not real. But there is one main trend I have seen. When I started in the business in the late '80s, Robert Heinlein, Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke—they were the authors hitting the bestseller list, and you still had magazines like Analog with 100,000 copies sold per issue. It was friendly and receptive to science fiction. Today, the authors hitting the bestseller list are fantasy writers: Jordan, Goodkind, Rowling, and now Tolkien and Lewis again because of the movies. You don't have science fiction magazines circulating the way they once did. It's definitely the case that it is easier to break in as a fantasy writer than as a science fiction writer. It is equally important to keep in mind that someone who is better at writing one genre should always be writing what they're good at. You'll break in easier linking to where your interests lie. So I wouldn't encourage writers to switch from science fiction to fantasy just because fantasy is selling better today.

Q: How has the pace of technology affected your business?
Technologically, if I have good news about a client, I'm much happier e-mailing twenty sub-agents overseas instead of faxing. I still believe that publishing is about finding bookstores that want to sell your book. Newer media like e-books and blogs are good, but the essence has changed less than some have thought.

Q: What accomplishment in your career are you the most proud of?
I'm proudest of the fact that I've been able to grow with my clients so that authors like Elizabeth Moon and Charlaine Harris, who started out with me fifteen to twenty years ago, have been willing to stick by me. I've been able to do good by them as they've become more successful.

Q: What advice would you give to beginning authors?
If you want to be a novelist, you actually need to write a novel. The second thing is educating yourself. You need to read the kind of books you write, but not just those. Being broad and

having experience and knowledge to draw from is so important to creating new work. Also, look at resources like *Publisher's Weekly* or *Locus* or *Writer's Digest*, or the business section of the paper. That will help you know what is happening in the world of media and communications and allow you to figure out how you fit in that world.

Be alert while you are reading. Try to think while you're reading a book what it is that is appealing to you or not appealing to you. What has the retailer or the publisher done that makes you want to read a particular book? How can you bring that knowledge back to your work and use it in your pursuit of getting a first book sold?

The Woods of Porden

By L. S. Taylor

Stay out of the woods.

Mother doesn't make many rules; not for me, at least. Young I may be, but she trusts me not to do anything stupid, and I think that for the most part, she knows I won't. She and I have an understanding that when she doesn't need me, I go where I want, and do as I choose, as long as I stay out of the woods.

There's plenty in this town to keep me occupied. Business is booming; gold's been found in the Mickel Mountains just north of here, and Porden's the nearest hub for supplies. Most mornings, I climb the fencepost and watch the newcomers trickle in. Many are men, come East to seek their fortune; they've naught else to do since the Barin Wars ended, and King Peront disbanded the mercenaries.

(Mother's taught me a lot of history. If it'd been practical, she'd have taught me books, too, but it isn't, and anyway, I like the way she talks when she's reading.)

Sometimes whole families arrive. They're not here for the gold; they're here to profit.

Those who've lived in Porden long enough know that cry: it was my way of telling them that I'd gone to fetch Mother, since she's the town Witch.

The day Ilira came to town, it was nearly noon. I'd been about to turn home; Mother needed my help setting a spell on her latest batch of healing ointment, and I'd an afternoon of basking planned after that. Sunshine's always welcome in Porden in spring, since they call these parts the Vale of Rain. There's a large rock at the center of Mother's garden, and on warm days, it's perfect for naps.

They were stragglers, by my estimate. The wayhouse isn't that far from town; an hour or two on horseback, a quarter-day by wagon. You have to leave a long time past dawn to get to Porden as late as they, and most people are in a hurry. Gold has fueled a madness in folk, so dawdlers are few. When I first saw these latest arrivals, I thought perhaps their mule had given them trouble on the road.

This was not Ilira's luck.

They were a family of three, their wagon packed to bursting with all of their worldly goods. The wife drove the cart as fast as the mule allowed; on her left side sat a small girl, no more than five. On her right side leaned the husband, heavily, and then I knew something was wrong. As they approached, the woman yelled shrilly: "Someone find a healer!"

Yowling, I scrambled off my perch and scurried towards home. Those who've lived in Porden long enough know that cry: it was my way of telling them that I'd gone to fetch Mother, since she's the town Witch. I bounded down the main street and turned at her cottage, then leapt through the open window. "Mother! Mother!"

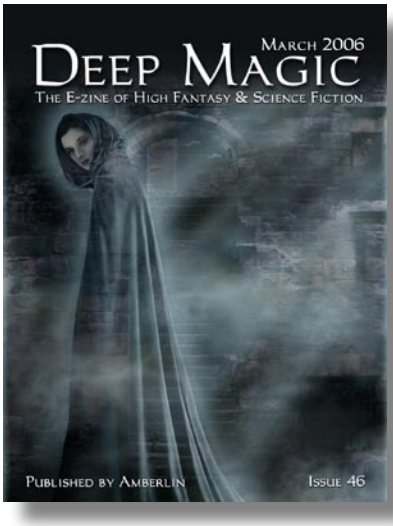
She awaited me in the kitchen. "Lead the way, Jinn."

I stared up at her, and my whiskers twitched; she'd already slung her healer's bag over her shoulder. Not pausing to catch my breath, I took her to the wagon.

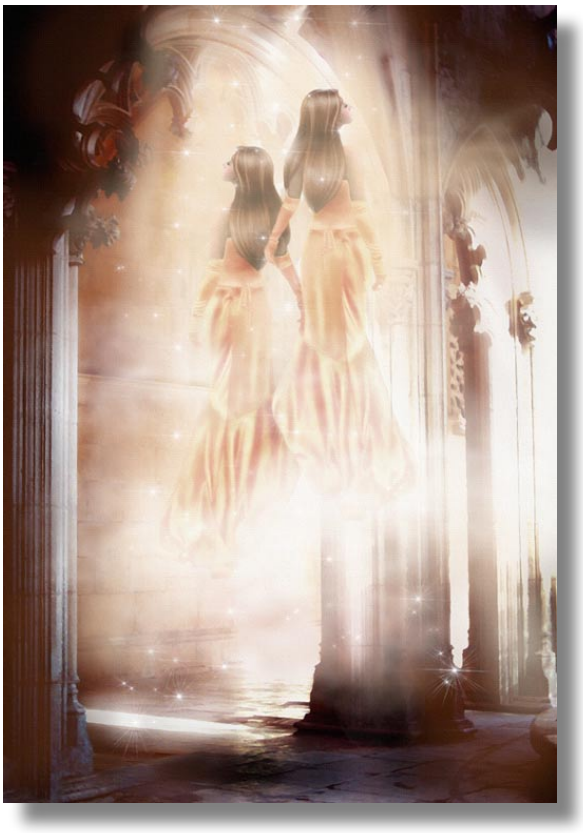
Some of the townspeople must have led the family toward Mother's house, for the cart

continued on page 38

Featured Artist
Shannon Hilson



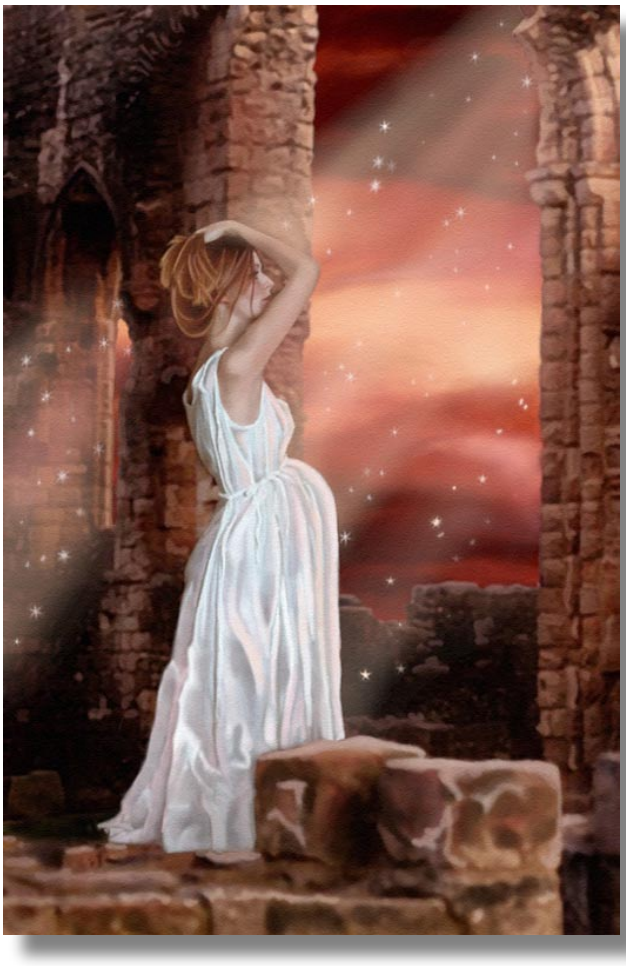
Age: 29
Residence: Manchester, CT
Marital Status: Long-term Relationship
Children: None
Hobbies: Apart from art, I also enjoy writing poetry and short stories, reading anything I can get my hands on, playing classical piano, cooking, and taking nature walks.
Personal Quote: It's never too late in life to learn something new, create something beautiful, or love someone with all your heart.
Favorite Book or Author: Toss-up between "The Divine Comedy" by Dante Aligheri and pretty much anything by Virginia Woolf.
Started Painting In: Early childhood. I've had a paintbrush or a drawing pencil of some kind in my hand ever since I can remember, although I started dabbling in digital art about a year ago.
Artist Most Inspired By: Michael Whelan
Media You Work In: These days I do digital paintings/photomanips in Photoshop CS for the most part, although I do still do detailed drawings in graphite from time to time.
Educational/Training Background: I'm mostly self-taught, but I do have an Associate of Arts degree specializing in painting.
Schools Attended: Monterey High School & Monterey Peninsula College
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: Prints are for sale through Deviant Art at www.wolfmorphine.deviantart/store, or I can be contacted personally in regards to commissioned work at lucy_vagabond@yahoo.com.
Website URL: www.wolfmorphine.deviantart.com



Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: Although I've loved to paint and draw ever since I was a small child, I do remember seeing M.C. Escher's "Relativity" when I was perhaps about 7 years old and wishing with all my heart I could create windows into other worlds that were even half as amazing as that one. I've been working on that ever since.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I think my work can best be described as a blending of surrealism, symbolism, and fantasy in equal parts.

continued on next page



Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Although much of my art is inspired by personal experience, life lessons I have learned, and small beauties I have noticed, I can find myself thrown into a creative frenzy by something so simple as a line in a novel or an image from a movie. Inspiration is waiting for us around every corner if we're looking for it.

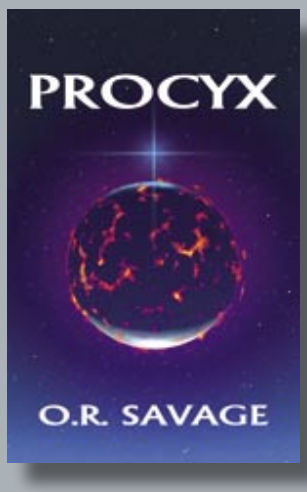
Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)
A: I am in love with the idea of ancient ghosts haunting ancient places, carrying the burdens of their own personal tragedies. I am equally in love with wondering what those stories might be and letting my imagination run wild. "Melancholy Kate" was a product of that, and actually the first ghost I had painted up to that point. The character of Kate herself was modeled after a vintage photo I stumbled across and was created not only to express my love of the idea behind her, but in hopes of inspiring others at the same time with her unspoken story.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: I am probably most strongly influenced by other artists. Some of them are famous names like Salvador Dali, John William Waterhouse, or Michael Whelan, while others are friends of mine that have astounding talents as well and inspire me daily with their creations. I am also inspired by much of what I read. I love ancient epic poems like "Dante's Inferno" or "The Iliad," as well as modern day fantasy-based novels by writers such as Anne Rice and Tanith Lee.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: I'd have to say that would be finally making the transition from traditional painting to digital painting during this past year and learning the ropes in a relatively short period of time. It has allowed me to take my art to a completely new level of expression.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: I'm seeing a lot more digital work these days, which I'm happy about. I love seeing what other artists can do with the same programs I use, and I love being inspired over and over again by what they create. I'm also seeing more symbolism in a lot of fantasy/sci-fi art as well. I'm sold on art that is not only beautiful and skillfully-executed, but has an extra layer of meaning underneath.

Amberlin Books, publisher of Deep Magic, is proud to showcase our print publications. Each book can be ordered online at Amazon.com and BN.com. They can also be ordered from your local bookstore.



ISBN: 1586490044

Procyx appeared at the edge of the Galaxy, just as ancient Mhyrnian texts had predicted. To scientists it was a fascinating anomaly, for it seemed to be a star that shone in only one color–a single frequency of pure, blue light. But then nearby worlds began to crumble, spinning into fiery deaths while their suns exploded or smothered out in a dreadful finality called Hypermotility. Humanity's only hope lay in the Vanguards, mythical vessels of irresistible power. Yet it seemed these wondrous ships of light were only myths. Meanwhile, centuries passed. More and more star systems died and nothing could be done to stop the spread of Procyx's cancerous ruin . . . unless the Mhyrnians had an answer for this too . . .

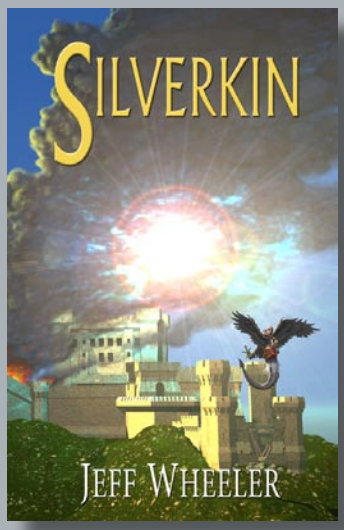
Cover Price: $14.95 Trade Paperback (three books in one!)

Landmoor & Silverkin

Buried in the catacombs beneath the fortress of Landmoor lies the Silverkin, an ancient talisman that can overcome any Forbidden Magic. Thealos Quickfellow has the right to claim the Silverkin but knows little about the deadly consequences befalling those who wield it. Before he can lay claim to it, however, he must first slip beyond the web of Sorian, who have beset Landmoor and battle amongst themselves for supremacy. Meanwhile, Exeres Tallin, a druid priest from Isherwood, has followed his dreams and mission to Landmoor. While there, he learns the truth of the evil Sorian as he is compelled to serve them. On his journey, Thealos will learn personally of the sacrifices required to become a Sleepwalker and how to use the Silverkin to save his people. But will using it destroy him?

Cover Prices: $9.95 Trade Paperback (Landmoor)
$9.95 Trade Paperback (Silverkin)

ISBN: 158649001X



ISBN: 1586490060

ISBN: 1586490028

ISBN: 1586490052

Deeper Magic Vol 1 & 2

These anthologies contain the best stories published by Deep Magic during the first two years of publication.

Cover Prices:

$12.95 Vol 2
$14.95 Vol 1
Trade Paperback

AMBERLIN BOOKS

Keeping the Peace

By Frank Tuttle

It was a Troll bar on the waterfront of a Troll town buried in the heart of a swamp so foul only a Troll would call it home. From inside the bar came the sort of noises only Trolls make—wet bass grumbling too deep to be human, ear-splitting peals of barking Troll laughter, and the hurricane-intensity wheezing and groaning that Trolls call breathing. It was a Troll bar, and no mistake—a Troll bar two hundred miles from the nearest Kingdom garrison and the kind of military clout required to remind the Trolls our races are finally at peace.

I looped my skiff's tie-line around a piling and stepped out onto the mossy wharf. The water made loud sucking noises, as if it was sorry to see me go, but was looking forward to seeing me again soon. Face down and dead still, goes the joke, is how human traffic on the Slow River travels through Troll country.

I counted forty steps to the bar. I stopped outside the opening, noted that it was covered by a filthy Kingdom flag decorated with Troll obscenities, and stroked my silver-tipped field wand for luck.

The flag was flung aside. A Troll trundled past, leaning and weaving, so full of *gak* and sump-weed that the sight of a human woman clad in a Kingdom sorcerer's robe didn't even make him growl.

Thump-thump-thump splash, and he was off the pier and paddling for home. I blew him a kiss, thumbed my wand to full burst, and ducked under the flag, into the bar.

Trolls like it dark. It was. Trolls also like it hot and loud. The bar was both, until my presence filtered through the grunts and the gak and the weed. Then things changed.

Trolls like it dark. It was. Trolls also like it hot and loud. The bar was both, until my presence filtered through the grunts and the *gak* and the weed. Then things changed.

By Troll standards, the room got deathly quiet, with only churning stomachs and heaving lungs competing with the swamp bugs for grand prize in the ugly noise sing-off. I stood still and waited for everyone to get a good look at me before I spoke.

"I'm looking for a man," I said, and waited while my wand translated Kingdom into Troll. "A human man. The Kingdom—" I waited for a chorus of growls and snarls to subside "—will pay handsomely for information about this man. He looks like this."

I gestured, not because it was necessary, but because Trolls are awestruck by even simple magics, and if I'm in a roomful of Trolls, I like to keep them awestruck.

An image took shape beside me. I watched Troll faces, tried to read recognition in gnarled, leathery features or deceit in unblinking coal-black eyes.

I saw neither.

"I ruined four pairs of boots for this," I muttered. Dutifully, my wand translated, even ignoring me when I gave it the squeeze-sign for silence.

As the echoes died, I heard a snicker. Trolls don't snicker. I let the image beside me collapse and squeezed the wand tight.

continued on page 43

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Science Fiction

Hyperion
By Dan Simmons

Published in 1989, *Hyperion* won a Hugo and spawned a sequel and three prequels. Against a science fiction backdrop, it is an homage to the *Canterbury Tales*: seven people, each with a story, are chosen to make the last pilgrimage to the Time Tombs on the frontier planet Hyperion, where all Hell is breaking loose. Signs show that in the near future, the empty, lifeless Time Tombs will divulge their secrets, the metal-spiked, ruby-eyed creature which guards them has appeared—with lethal results—far outside its previously restricted range, and the barbarian Ousters are moving to invade.

The prologue's jumble of portentous proper nouns does not immediately grab one's attention, but the novel springs into life as soon as the pilgrims sit down together over dinner and seven contrasting personalities begin to push and pull at one another. One pilgrim suggests that each give an account of his or her tie to Hyperion and its monster—the Shrike—the better to understand why they have been chosen and what they are up against. They draw lots, and from there, *Hyperion* swings through the interwoven tales of the pilgrims and of their pilgrimage without loosing you from its grip.

Simmons displays a knack for molding flesh onto the skeletons of archetypal characters and plots, and doing so with such inventiveness that he tunes into a reader's emotional resonances without chancing triteness. The stories begin with a narrative of a journey into a dark continent, told through the diaries of a priest and anthropologist who seeks out a legendary tribe on Hyperion and finds something horrific, which is followed by the tales of a soldier in love with a woman who only appears to him inside computer simulations and dreams, of a poet convinced the Shrike is his muse, of a professor whose tranquil life is derailed when the Shrike curses his daughter to relive her life in reverse, and so forth. Each offers a deeper glimpse into the civilization of the planet-spanning Hegemony, connected by farcaster portals, aided by enigmatic artificial intelligences, and into the mystery of the Shrike and the Tombs—and some reverse what you thought you knew. Emerging from this tangle of stories and stories within stories—tales of love and war, time and immortality, poetry and superhuman devotion—is the realization that the fate of humanity is in the balance, and may already be sealed.

Possible objectionable content: Wanton abuse of alcohol and four-letter words. Simmons also tends to rely overmuch on scenes of graphic sex and violence to ratchet up emotional drama.

(Reviewed by Ida Clinkscales)

Book Review: Fantasy

Anansi Boys
By Neil Gaiman

Fat Charlie Nancy is one of those people who defines mediocrity: there's nothing special about him that is worth remembering, even his girlfriend/fiancée is as safe as they come. And then his father, who has embarrassed him all his life, dies. Charlie, who has been living in England, flies to Florida for the funeral

continued on next page

and his life slowly begins to unravel as he learns that he has a brother whom he never knew existed. But to make matters worse, his father is/was actually the African trickster spider-god, Anansi, and his brother got all of Dad's powers while Charlie got… mediocrity.

While that's the plot synopsis, there's so much more to this book. To begin with, this is one of the best screwball comedies I've ever read. P.G. Wodehouse really created the genre with his Jeeves and Wooster, and Blandings Castle tales. It could be argued that Thorne Smith perfected the fantastic screwball comedy back in the '20s and '30s with *Topper, Topper Takes a Trip,* and *The Night Life of the Gods*, among others, but Gaiman takes the genre to new heights with *Anansi Boys*. The pacing is almost perfect and the plotting is incredibly tight (which is amazing with Gaiman since he loves to throw everything, including the kitchen sink, into his stories, creating a story that usually sprawls all over the place).

But what makes this novel stand out are the characters. They are wonderfully well-drawn and while they begin as caricatures, by novel's end, they are all more embodied and developed (except maybe the villain). Gaiman's strength has always been in taking 'normal' people (if you can call the son of an African trickster god 'normal') and putting them through the ropes. He does this to Richard Mayhew in *Neverwhere,* and Shadow in *American Gods* to wonderful effect, and he does the same to Fat Charlie in *Anansi Boys*. By keeping his characters real, Gaiman draws the reader in and makes the fantastic seem plausible, whether it has to do with entering the land of dreams, confronting a homicidal boss, or discovering that you are now a ghost.

If you haven't read Gaiman before, *Anansi Boys* is as good a starting point as any. If you're an old fan of Gaiman, then you're in for a great treat.

Possible objectionable material: There are mild sexual references, as well as a somewhat graphic scene of one character's tongue being torn out.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

continued from page 16

then? It's a matter of some urgency." He turned toward the door but gestured back at the potpie. "Would you like the kitchen to wrap that for travel?"

Feiza glanced at her food then strode toward the door, shaking her head. "No. It's served its purpose."

* * *

Booth talked as they rode in the Sandalwood's carriage.

"Young Master Elgin has recently been dabbling in your field of expertise—the alchemical arts. This has been at the encouragement of Lord Sandalwood, who wishes the lad to learn an honest trade."

Feiza nodded. Every few seasons it seemed to happen—the nobles realized they were rearing a generation of indolent, conscienceless brats, and took perfunctory steps to try and halt that. This typically took the form of an occupation fad, in which all the rich children were pressed to learn a commoner's trade.

Every child's dedication to that trade, in turn, tended to last a month or two, degenerating from education to hobby to a return to spending the family fortune and doing nothing.

Now they were fooling around with alchemy. Feiza feared what might happen if one of the clueless snot-noses took up magic; they'd probably incinerate half the city.

"...So you can see our cause for concern," Booth was finishing.

"Ahhh...um, yes," Feiza said. "I'm sorry, would you mind going over a few points again? I was—"

"You were imaging what kind of damage the Young Master could have caused while I was actually telling you about the damage he *had* caused," said Booth, giving a bit more of a smile. The carriage slowed as it turned onto the cobblestone entry road to Northside. "But as we're almost there, I'm afraid Miss will have to see for herself."

As the carriage rolled to a stop, he said, "Do please try to be more attentive when the Lord of the house speaks to you, Miss Corbie."

The coach driver opened the door, and Feiza stepped out onto a breathtaking view. Sandalwood Manor stood before her, ten times as big as any other building in the village. Pillars formed from marble not of this continent flanked the main doors while stained-glass windows winked from every face, casting rainbow patterns on the lawn.

Across that lawn strode Lord Sandalwood, seemingly ten times bigger than any other person in the village.

"Is this she?" he asked Booth.

"Yes, sir. Miss Corbie, Lord—"

"Sandalwood, yes, yes," said the lord. "Come this way." He turned and walked back toward the house, double time. Feiza followed, unsure if she should be lagging two paces behind. Sandalwood turned as if to speak to her and seemed annoyed that she wasn't by his side. Feiza took a couple of hopping steps to catch up as they entered the foyer.

"My servant filled you in on the details?"

"Yes sir." Feiza tried not to be distracted by the opulence around her. They passed a mural depicting Sandalwood astride a huge horse. Art objects from the world over were displayed in massive, polished-wood cabinets.

"And what is your initial opinion?"

"Well, it's better if I observe the problem first-hand before making any judgments."

Sandalwood frowned. "First-hand?"

Feiza didn't know what to say to that. "Just an expression, sir."

The lord harrumphed and turned a corner whip-quick. Feiza kept going and nearly collided with an enormous vase. When she reached Sandalwood again, he was standing outside a door, tapping his foot.

"My son's laboratory," he said. "I trust you'll be able to put a quick end to this problem?"

Feiza nodded. "I'll do my best."

Sandalwood rolled his eyes and spoke as if addressing an incompetent. "I trust...you'll be able...to put a quick end...to this problem?"

Feiza nodded again. "Very quick, yes sir."

Sandalwood hurried away, leaving Feiza by the closed door. She knocked and, hearing no answer, pushed it open on silent hinges.

The state of a room always reflected its occupant, and the room into which Feiza stepped screamed 'Bored Wealthy Teenager'. A dozen or more unfinished hobbies lay in pieces from corner to corner: a half-whittled piece of ebon wood, a canvas with a design sketched but not painted, even a block of stone with a few half-hearted bits chiseled away. Dirty clothes were piled in defiance of what Feiza knew must be a crack housekeeping staff.

The centerpiece of the chaos was a large chemist's table, black quartz-topped and wooden-legged, at which stood a young man, staring at her. He touched the table with one hand as though keeping his balance.

Feiza blinked. She'd almost missed him standing there. "Hello," she said, giving a quick bow. "I'm Feiza Corbie, the alchemist. Your father wanted me to help you with this...problem you're having?"

He looked at her, sullen. "Elgin," he said, blowing the fringe out of his eyes. "And it's not a problem. It's the worst thing that could ever happen to anyone. Ever."

Feiza bit her tongue and approached the table, putting on a smile. "Oh, it can't be that bad, surely. Why don't you tell me more about it, and we'll see what we can do to fix it?"

Elgin stared at her, and let his eyes drift down to the table. Feiza looked also, and felt a twinge in her gut. No wonder Sandalwood had reacted to her choice of words in that way.

Elgin's hand and a large section of the tabletop were fused together, transformed into lead.

"Saturn and Sun," Feiza whispered. She reached out to touch the area of transmuted metal.

"Don't," Elgin said. Feiza looked up at him. "It spreads," he said.

She withdrew her hand, still staring at the patch of lead. "How quickly?"

Elgin shrugged. "Dunno. But if you touch it, you're stuck." He shifted as much as his fixated hand would allow, revealing a wooden dowel under his arm, likewise jutting from the table, likewise turning to metal.

"I poked it with the stick after...this...happened," he said. "It rooted to the spot as soon as it hit the lead." He frowned. "Stupid empirical method."

Feiza looked up. "You know the Methods?"

Elgin's expression was confused. "Well...don't you sort of have to know them to be an alchemist?"

"You're joking. You're actually interested in alchemy?"

Elgin's eyes dipped back down to the table. "Not at first. I mean, I figured it was just another stupid employment trend my father was trying to force me to do. But when I started studying it, it was *really* interesting. I wanted to do it. So I started experimenting, and there

was this flash, and before I could move, it..." He looked up at Feiza again, and anything insolent in his eyes was gone, replaced with a child's fear. "Can you stop it?"

Feiza smiled. "The world needs all the alchemists it can get, Elgin. I'll stop it. I promise."

* * *

Hobby or not, Lord Sandalwood had stocked the laboratory with the finest alchemical texts available. Feiza struggled not to drool over some of the rarer, more esoteric books on display.

It was lucky that the lab's bookshelves were so well stocked; they were her only resource. Elgin couldn't recall what he'd mixed together, and the solution he'd created had transformed the beaker holding it into lead as well.

As she worked, she chatted with Elgin—in part to keep the boy's mind off his predicament and in part because she hadn't met someone with such a thirst for knowledge in years. He was genuinely fascinated by alchemy, and not just with a layman's lead-to-gold fixation. He was drawn to all aspects of the field: the planets, the Magical Calendar, the interaction of matter and intangible forces, the Sevenfold Pattern and all the rest.

"I don't understand Quintessence, though," he said, as Feiza dug through yet another tome.

"Everything and nothing," Feiza said, tracing a passage with her finger. "It underlies the world, connects all things, but has no matter or energy of its own. They say the dead travel through it, connect up with it when they pass away."

Elgin looked down at the table. "Don't guess I'll ever have a chance to study it."

"None of that talk," Feiza said. "There's a solution here, I know it. There's always a pattern: action A, plus action B, always equals result C. We know the result; we just have to work it backwards."

But after eight hours of research, with the sunlight fading and candlelight proving inadequate for reading, Feiza hadn't found a single thing relating to Elgin's condition: neither cause nor cure.

"Lead," she said, closing a book and tapping its edge against her forehead. "Why lead?"

"What's the problem with lead?" Elgin asked, eyes flicking down to his altered hand.

"Oh, lead itself isn't a problem, per se," said Feiza. "It's just that transmutation is transmutation. It's every bit as difficult to turn something into lead as it is gold, or mercury, or tin, or such." She held the heavy tome upright in her lap and rested her chin on the upper edge, looking at the table. "So the question returns: why lead? Why is the reaction defaulting to that particular element? Its properties have to do with darkness, negativity...the saturnine. But—"

Sandalwood stuck his head in, not for the first time that day. He saw Elgin's still-metal hand, shook his head, and gave a sigh loud enough that Feiza was sure to hear it.

"*Books*," she heard him mutter as he closed the door.

When Sandalwood's footsteps had faded from hearing, Elgin mumbled, "I'm doing what he *wants* me to."

Feiza glanced over at Elgin, an apologetic smile on her face, but he wouldn't meet her eyes. She sighed herself, cracked open the book, and got back to work.

Booth looked in on them later, and began stocking the fireplace with wood. "His Lordship has left the residence for the evening," he said. "Perhaps Miss would like to sleep in her own bed tonight, and come back before his return tomorrow?"

Feiza made as if to protest, but Elgin cut her off. "You've been staring at the same page

for an hour," he said. "Go home."

"I'm sorry," Feiza said. "I haven't found anything yet, but I'll keep—"

"I know," said Elgin. "See you tomorrow."

Booth escorted Feiza to the door, her head swimming with the contents of a dozen dense textbooks. She looked at the butler as he held the door for her, the coach outside waiting.

"I really am trying," she said. "It's just like nothing I've ever..."

"The Young Master knows," said Booth. "He wouldn't have spoken as you departed if he didn't have some confidence in you."

"I hope it's not misplaced," Feiza said.

"Miss might consider not voicing such doubts in front of the Lord or Young Master," Booth said, not unkindly. "The coach will pick you up at cock-crow."

Feiza boarded the carriage and let its gentle jostling lull her to sleep on the short journey home. The driver woke her upon arrival, and as she walked up the hostel steps, eyes drooping, she reflected on the one good thing about the whole mess: the transformation's spread seemed to be very slow, very gradual.

At least she'd have plenty of time to solve the problem.

* * *

The knocking came hard and loud, rousing Feiza from a brief slumber. She fumbled in the darkness for her dressing gown and made it to the door as another burst of knocks sounded.

Booth was there, out of breath.

"...Is it time already?" Feiza asked, smacking the sleep-scum in her mouth. The sun hadn't even begun to peek through the curtains.

"Apologies, Miss, but there has been an adjustment to the schedule. We require you back at the manor now."

"Let me just get dress—"

"I took the liberty of bringing one of her Ladyship's old casual outfits; you may change in the coach." As an afterthought, "I shall ride up front with the driver."

Feiza's eyes widened. "It's that bad?"

"So bad, we have no time to discuss it. Come along."

* * *

As the carriage approached, Feiza took the dull coloration of the manor to be caused by the diminishing moonlight. But as they drew to a stop, she could see the bleak sight for what it truly was.

The entire house had turned to lead.

She stumbled from the carriage, trying to take in the whole vista. The structure was already beginning to list, sinking slowly but inexorably into the soft soil. The walls, windows, and a small portion of the surrounding grounds were now a uniform grey, drained of their former majesty.

"Is everyone—?"

Booth cleared his throat. "The Young Master was, of course, inside. His Lordship is on his way; he was at his summer home outside of town. There were a handful of night staff within the building, but the majority of the servants were, like me, in their quarters." He pointed at a

small, untransformed building sitting to the side of the manor proper.

"One big surge," Feiza muttered. "As slowly as it was spreading, this seems more like a cyclical event; an expansion based on the clock, the motion of the spheres, rather than the interaction of matter."

"And what can be done about it?" asked Booth, glancing towards the entryway gates.

"If it's a cycle...but you know, maybe it isn't, maybe it was triggered by the absence of light? And the firelight in the room was sufficient to keep it from spreading much further. But when the world turned its face away from the Sun..." Feiza bit her lower lip. "Speaking of timing, when do we expect Lord Sandalwood to—" and she saw the coach pull through the gates, "Oh."

Sandalwood was out of the coach before the footman could even open the door for him, raging across the lawn towards Feiza. He walked close by a topiary elephant, and gave it a lash with his cane as he passed.

"What did you do to my house?" he shouted, pointing the cane at her like a rapier.

Feiza stood, trying not to flinch. Surprising even herself, she spoke: "Your son's in there, too."

"Yes," Sandalwood shot back, "the son you were meant to be helping!" His eyes narrowed. "Speaking of, why weren't you in the house?"

"I...went home to get some chemicals and texts."

"Oh? And where are they?" Sandalwood said, looking around with exaggerated care.

Feiza worked her jaw. "I...forgot to..."

Sandalwood smiled with terrifying friendliness. "Well, we'll have to send someone back to fetch your belongings, then, won't we?" He snapped his fingers and a huge, thuggish manservant came over. "Abernathy," he said, "could you tell one of the men to return to Miss Corbie's home and retrieve...chemicals and books, was it? Did you want any in particular?"

Feiza rattled off a list of compounds and book titles; Abernathy's expression reflected no understanding. He turned to go, but Sandalwood caught his sleeve.

"Before you go, Miss Corbie needs to analyze the problem more closely. Could you make her comfortable over," and he pointed at a nearby patch of transformed lawn, "there?"

Feiza could only back up a step before the hulking servant lunged forward and picked her up. She kicked and thrashed and slapped to no avail.

Abernathy planted her on her feet, and immediately Feiza could feel the effect leach up through her boots and feet, turning them to metal, cutting off any sensation but still leaving them feeling attached, horribly attached and part of her body.

She wobbled for a second, pin-wheeling her arms to keep from falling over, images in her mind of pitching backwards only to snap her feet off at the ankles.

"There," Sandalwood purred. "Call it an incentive to remain on-site."

Feiza stared down at her altered feet, and up at Sandalwood again. He was smiling.

"I trust *today* you won't dawdle in solving the problem?" He walked away without waiting for a reply, Abernathy stomping behind.

The sun was just beginning to ascend, adding light, allowing Feiza to get a better look at her situation. She craned her neck back and could see the manor's chimneys starting to sag and sink into the roof. The roof itself was bowing, and there was a pronounced lean to the once-marble columns out front.

Booth approached, making a point of not looking down, and spoke, his expression neutral. "Is there...anything I can do to assist, Miss?"

Feiza caught herself before she tried to turn to face the house. "Look at it, Booth. The heaviness and softness of the lead are working against one another—the house is caving in on itself. I might find a way to return it to normal, but if anyone in there is crushed, they'll revert back looking like a pile of ground beef."

Booth's expression went a bit left of neutral.

"It's worse than that," Feiza said. "I think the effect is going to be even bigger the next time it hits. The initial spill altered Elgin's hand. Next, it expanded to consume the house. If I'm figuring the size of this building correctly, the next occurrence will transform...roughly three concentric city blocks. Then nine, then," she rapidly ticked off on her fingers, "well, suffice to say it'll eat the world in short order."

Booth went to full blanch. "What can be done?"

"Stay and help me—please—but then get to a safe distance if we can't fix it by sunset," Feiza said. "And if that becomes the case, I'd suggest hopping a ship south to the Frost Lands; you should have two or three weeks to spend getting stinking drunk before there's nowhere left to go."

Booth at last looked down at Feiza's feet, set his mouth in a line and nodded. "I'll have someone bring your belongings."

* * *

Booth wound up doing most of the work; Feiza was in no position to do anything other than supervise. She would read formulae from books, which Booth would mix to the best of his abilities, pouring each mixture onto Feiza's feet with no success.

As the latest batch of chemicals fizzed and sputtered and resolutely failed to restore her feet to normal, Feiza sighed and glanced at the skyline. Dusk was coming.

"Time to go, Booth," she said. "I appreciate everything you've done. Better luck next life, eh?"

Booth straightened up, inclined his head towards the city. "I think Miss will find there is at least another hour until sunset. Perhaps she would like to continue until then?"

Feiza smiled sadly. "I think Mr. Booth will find that, when the effect strikes, there's going to be a mass panic to escape the city. Perhaps he'll want to leave now to avoid the rush?"

"There is something to be said for waiting, Miss Corbie."

Feiza shook her head. "Are you this disobedient with Sandalwood?" She glanced down at the book. "'Something to be said for'..." Her head snapped up. "Veal potpie."

Booth looked concerned. "Are you...hungry, Miss?"

"Sometimes you just have to wait and let things happen," Feiza said, staring at the butler. "Booth, I have one more formula for you to concoct, and then I need you to go. Will you promise me you'll do that, and not argue?"

Booth nodded, crouching down to the chemical kit at Feiza's feet. "Shall I pour this mixture in the same location as before?"

"No," Feiza said. "In fact, go ahead and mix it standing up. I'm going to be drinking it."

* * *

Booth got the chemicals combined as the sunlight went red. He held the test tube up to Feiza's mouth, but hesitated. "I didn't recognize any of the components of this solution," he said.

"Miss isn't drinking...poison, is she?"

"Booth," Feiza said. "You've no faith at all." She smiled. "It's not poison. I hope you're right though—that it is a solution. Come on," she said, holding out her hand, "bottoms up."

Booth gave her the tube and Feiza downed its contents. "Wish me luck," she said, wiping her mouth.

"May I inquire...?"

"There are certain chemicals—plant extracts, fungi—that temporarily change the mind and align one's thoughts with other planes. What I'm aiming for is to connect with the Quintessence—the underlying force of reality. When the transformation happens, I should still be in communion with the universe, and my mind should survive intact, resonating through the lead structures."

Booth eyed the empty test tube. "How will that help?"

"Because if my studies are correct, Elgin's mind should be trapped in there as well. If I can contact it, find out from his unrecalled memories what he did, then I should be able to effect change from within the lead and reverse the process."

"You sound very confident."

"That's because I'm trying to convince myself it'll work. We're going into deep theory, Booth. People can travel into the Quintessence, but like the ocean, it doesn't much care about those who swim in it one way or another. People who venture there tend not to come back. But whenever you've exhausted logical paths of action, the time always comes to try stupid—" Feiza inhaled, hissing, as the metal of her feet rippled, and spread up to her knees in a sudden spurt of activity. She looked at Booth, tears of pain in her eyes.

"...Run, Booth. Run like hell."

The butler grimaced but bowed. "Best of luck to you...Feiza." He turned and walked away, not looking back, any urge to panic trumped by stoicism. The rest of the staff stopped their loitering and gawking and followed Booth's lead, exiting the premises on foot, the whole group tramping out through the main gates.

The effect hiccupped again, and spread up to Feiza's waist. She closed her eyes and tried to meditate, tried not to dwell on the lack of feeling in half of her body.

Pinwheels of light formed in her eyes; colors and sounds followed soon after.

"Took you long enough to kick in," she said. "Now, let's—"

The effect jumped up to her chest, her lungs, and she spoke no more.

Seconds later, it engulfed her head.

But her thoughts did not cease.

* * *

Everything and nothing. Feiza's words came back to her, and she wondered how she could even be recalling them, as she didn't seem to exist anymore.

But then, if she didn't exist, how could she be aware of the fact that she didn't exist? No body, but a sense of presence, of self. And she couldn't shake the feeling that, despite the total lack of matter and energy in this...place, someone was standing right beside—

"Feiza?"

She started, gasped with neither lungs nor air.

"Elgin?"

"Yeah. So...I guess you weren't able to figure it out." She could hear the disappointment

in his voice, let down by yet another adult.

"What did I say about that kind of talk?" Feiza said. "As long as we're still alive, we have a chance to figure this out."

Elgin paused, and Feiza fancied she could hear the wheels turning inside his head.

"We?" he asked at last. "What can *I* do? I'm the one who started all of this."

"I need you to try and remember what you put in that beaker," Feiza said. "I think I can—"

"I can't!" Elgin said. "I told you out there, I don't remember at all."

"But that was out there," Feiza said, calm despite herself. "In here, it's different. All is the Quintessence, and the Quintessence is all. Every thought you've ever had, from birth to present, should be accessible to you. Don't try to force it; let the memories come to you smoothly, naturally..."

Eternity came and went.

"I've got it," Elgin said, and Feiza let out a non-breath she'd been holding.

Elgin rattled off his list, pleased with himself. "Iodine. Birch sap. Mercury. Aqua regia."

"...That's...not possible," Feiza said. "Those components...there's no way they could cause this effect. The only thing they'd do is create a big burst of poisonous vapor; you were lucky you weren't k—"

Another eternity passed.

"Oh, no," Feiza said.

"What? What were you saying? I was lucky I didn't *what*?"

"Elgin," Feiza said, "I think I know what may be happening here, but I want you to stay calm while I tell you. If you get upset, it could be very bad for everyone."

"What are you talking about?" Staying calm wasn't on Elgin's agenda.

"I'm talking about finding you here, your personality intact. There are only a few circumstances in which someone can exist independently within the Quintessence, without being swept away by the enormity of it all: I'm zonked on mind-altering herbs, for one. People can also survive through sheer force of will; if they have a strong enough personality, they could—"

"What the hell's going on?" shouted a third voice.

Lord Sandalwood.

"Corbie!" he thundered. "You stupid girl, you've failed! It consumed the whole village, thanks to your incompetence."

"Father..."

"And you! It was your idiotic fiddling with those worthless chemicals that started this whole mess."

"I didn't—"

"Stupid—"

"Didn't mean to—"

"Moronic—"

"I couldn't—"

"Waste of—"

"*Enough!*" Feiza shouted, voice seeming to echo after she'd stunned the other two into silence. She took another non-breath, released it in increments. "Enough, all right? This situation is going to be difficult to fix as it stands without you two polluting the edge of creation with your little domestic squabbles. That's what caused this whole thing, anyway, directly or no."

"What are you on about?" Sandalwood said, but Feiza could hear the doubt in his voice, the sound she'd encountered many times as an academic. It was the sound of someone brushing up against his personal wall of ignorance, but trying to cover with bluster.

"Alchemists learn that one thing follows another," she said. "It's the way of the cosmos. If you perform action A, followed by action B..."

"You get result C," Elgin said.

Feiza almost nodded before she caught herself. "If you mix acid and alkali, you get salt. If you mix a domineering father, a child desperate for approval, and a dangerous hobby, you get an accident.

"And if you mix mercury and aqua regia in a stuffy, enclosed space...you get a dead alchemist." She closed her eyes, and the void around her seemed to grow darker. "...I'm sorry, Elgin. I'm so sorry."

Elgin stayed silent, but Feiza felt something: a ripple, passing through the nothingness.

"What are you saying? My son is not *dead*," Sandalwood said; the doubt in his voice still there. "If he were dead, how could I see him? How could you talk to him?"

"We saw him because we wanted to; you, me, the servants—we were all expecting him to be there, so he was. We also saw him because he didn't realize he was dead just then. I imagine it was very sudden."

"Hogwash."

"I'm afraid not," said Feiza. "Mixing together the chemicals he did—there's no way that could cause this spreading transformation. But the power of a spirit, newly freed, filled with bleak emotions and a little knowledge of alchemy, linking up with the underlying fabric of reality? There's no telling what he could do. Lead symbolizes negativity, and what teenager doesn't want to make the whole world go away sometimes?"

"I didn't mean to," Elgin began.

"Of course you did!" Sandalwood shouted, and Feiza felt another wave sweeping through.

"Listen to what this woman is saying," Sandalwood continued raging. "You ham-fistedly killed yourself, and look what the result is!"

"Lord Sandalwood, this really isn't help—" Feiza said.

"Shut up! You're just as much to blame as the boy. If you hadn't spent so much time lolly-gagging you might've reversed the effect before it engulfed me!"

Another tremor passed. Feiza imagined the lead sweeping the world, spreading across the surface in mass spurts with every outburst inflicted upon Elgin.

"Lord Sandalwood, you need to—look, if you want there to be any chance of getting out of this mess, you'll do me a favor and keep your mouth closed."

"How...dare...you?"

"The world is still turning to lead," Feiza said. "We know a few things about the motion of the spheres through the heavens. The world is where it is because of its size and weight. Any lighter or smaller, and it would fall away from the sun. Any heavier, and it would fall into the sun to be burned to ash."

"The effect is making the world heavier," Elgin said. "So...if it starts to fall into the sun, even if we reverse the transformation, it'll already be too late. We'll burn just the same."

"Exactly," Feiza said.

"So what can I do to stop it?"

"Not a damned thing, I'd imagine," Sandalwood said. His voice was hollow, stripped of its pomposity. "You've killed us all, lad. Bravo."

"First thing," Feiza said after riding out another wave, "is to quit listening to him. He's as much a cause of this as anything else."

"And the second thing?" asked Elgin, admirably ignoring the torrent of parental abuse triggered by Feiza's remark.

"You have to let go," Feiza said. "I'm sorry, but the longer you stay here, and the longer you let your mortal concerns affect you, the longer the world is going to be changed. You have to let go and pass on."

"Or you'll kill us all!" Sandalwood shouted.

Eternity passed by twice.

"...So if I don't do this, if I don't let myself pass on, my father will be right? I'll kill the whole world?"

"Yes," said Feiza, trying to keep the calculations out of her head. How fast was the spread happening? How much longer did the world have?

"All right, I'll let go. Anything to prove him wrong."

As Sandalwood spluttered, Feiza spoke to Elgin in low, soothing tones, talking him through it.

"It's just like falling asleep, Elgin. Just let your thoughts and concerns drift away one by one, until there's nothing left..."

"You'll fail, boy—like you have at everything else you've ever attempted."

"None of it matters, Elgin," Feiza said. "You're going on a journey into lands no one has ever charted. Just be free."

"From the day you killed your mother as she birthed you, you've been nothing but a failure!"

"Just like sleeping...just like sleeping."

Elgin's voice was drowsy. "I think I'm finally going...thank you."

Feiza smiled. She could almost see the world beginning to bleed back in, replacing the void in her vision. She couldn't tell if it was in color, or a uniform grey. "Good journey to you."

"You'll come back," Sandalwood said. "Crawling back from another screw-up."

The world was breaking through; the Quintessence was withdrawing itself. As Feiza's sight returned, she could see Elgin fading away, a smile on his face.

He said, "One last thing..."

* * *

Feiza came to herself back on the lawn of Sandalwood Manor, and the colors around her—blue sky, green grass, the multi-colored windows of the manse—were overwhelming.

A flash of grey caught her eye, and she flinched as she saw it. Her eyes traveled over the new shape standing in front of the house, and she sat on the lawn, shaking her head, the tiredness catching up with her at last. She closed her eyes and let the weariness and relief take her into a doze, the sounds of a city in recovery drifting through the air.

Booth found her slumped there hours later.

"Miss Corbie?" he asked, shaking her shoulder, eyes flickering over what now stood in the courtyard. "Should I ask...?"

"Everything's back to normal, Booth," she said, staggering to her feet.

"Normal?"

"Well, 'normal' is relative. Let's just say everything's the way it should be." She walked

past the stunned butler, patting his arm as she left. "Let me know if you ever need help again."

Feiza walked out into the city, past the new leaden statue which stood in front of Sandalwood Manor.

It depicted two figures, a father and son, embracing.

The son's expression was one of love, tempered with a dark wryness.

The father's face showed fear, confusion, and awkwardness.

But if one looked deeply enough into his eyes, there were the beginnings of acceptance there, as well.

The End

Stephen Couch is a computer programmer and award-winning audio drama producer residing in Texas. His fiction has appeared in NEO-OPSIS and FICTITIOUS FORCE. Visit him online and pelt him with virtual stones at www.stephencouch.com.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 20

drew near as we stepped outside. Mother took one look at the man and called to the burliest of the bystanders: "He's still breathing. Help him inside."

They struggled with the man—for a peasant, he was awfully large—and finally lugged him to the couch in the front room, where Mother treats most of her patients. Mother set down her bag and found a cloth, which she dipped in the pail of rainwater she kept at the ready. Once the man was made comfortable, and the bystanders dismissed, she hastily quizzed his wife.

"He just collapsed?"

"Aye, Mistress," said the woman, a lean creature of middle years whose ratty brown hair fell only to her shoulders. "This morning, as we were leaving…" A look of fear crossed her face, and she said no more. She looked nothing like her daughter. The small girl, who sat solemnly in the corner, was a thing of beauty.

I found myself watching the tawny-haired child as Mother questioned the woman. Her hazel eyes took in the scene with curious fascination. When they fell on me, the child said softly, "Kitty," and I couldn't help but trot over to her side. I kept my distance, however, until she carefully reached out a hand; I knew then that she would be gentle. She scratched me behind the ears, and I purred.

"Is my father dead?" she asked me, in such a small voice that only I could have heard.

"Not yet," I replied, though I knew she would not understand me. Nor could she see the man's swiftly-dimming aura that told me as much.

"Oh," she said, and I looked at her sharply. But five-year-olds are prone to fancies, and perhaps she had imagined my reply.

"Jinn," called Mother. I returned to her side.

"He's dying," I told her.

Mother nodded grimly. "We must do what we can."

I leapt upon the man's chest. Sometimes, even when one is at death's door, we can bring them back. Mother must work her deep magic, the sort that leaves her weary for days afterward, but a life is saved. Purring, I drew forth my own powers, latching onto the man's tenuous life force. Through this I would channel Mother's healing.

The life slipped through my paws, and the man died.

Mother felt it as I did, even before she began the deep magic. She nodded grimly.

"I'm sorry," she told the wife. "He is dead."

The woman wailed once, and fainted.

* * *

Mother had the body removed immediately. When they asked, she told the Death Priests that the man had been a nameless farmer, and instructed that he be cremated at once. This was not a strange request, as Mother often asked as much when sickness was a risk. After they left, though, she muttered, "Gods forgive me," and I knew then that something was not right.

The day's work interrupted, and Mother unwilling to talk, I went to my rock. If no one needed me, then I would bask. As I said, there are few enough warm days in Porden.

The child found me in the garden. She was wise, for a five-year-old; as she stroked, she knew not to press too hard, or to pull my whiskers or tail. She leaned her head against my rock as she crouched over me. "Am I going to live here?"

I opened one eye. "What makes you ask that?"

"The winds told me."

Now I hesitated. She could have imagined she spoke to me; she could be playing nothing more than a child's game of pretend. But Mother has taught me much, and a child who spoke to the winds was of the greater Witch-kind, possessed of a power even Mother did not hold. Both eyes open now, I uncurled and sat up. "What else do the winds tell you?"

"They say my father's dead."

"Yes," I said. "Did you not see?"

"No. They took me away. But the winds told me."

My tail-fur stood on end, but I resisted the urge to hiss. "What is your name?"

The child brightened. "I'm Ilira. You're Jinn, aren't you? I heard the Witch call you that."

"I am," I murmured, staring at the girl with fascination. "Where do you live, Ilira?"

"At the palace, with my papa. But he's dead."

I hopped down from my rock. "Come inside with me." Mother needed to know, if she didn't already, that the princess and sole heir to the realm currently sat in the garden behind her house.

She shook her head. "No."

As startled as I'd been by her identity, her antics irked me. "Why not?"

"Bad men are coming."

I paused, torn. I ought to guard the princess … but Mother must be warned. "Stay there," I told her, and ran inside.

The woman was awake, and in the kitchen she and Mother were talking. The woman was upset. "We had to take her, Mistress!" said the woman. "They'd have killed her, too!"

"I understand that," Mother told her. "But who wanted the King dead?"

"Prince Marun's always had an eye for the throne. It was him that—"

Just like that, there came a pounding at the door.

"Open up, in the name of King Peront!"

"A fine thing for them to pretend he's still alive," the woman muttered.

"Perhaps they know no better," Mother replied. Calmly she rose, and opened her door wide.

Soldiers stormed inside. "Where is the princess?" demanded their leader.

"Princess?" Mother asked.

Two soldiers grabbed the woman. "It's a crime to harbor fugitives," said one. "Show us to the Grand Vizier and Princess Ilira at once!"

Mother feigned a gasp. "I am a Witch," she exclaimed. "This woman brought me a dying man. If he was who you say he was, then I am afraid he is no more."

The lead soldier frowned, then bowed, for a Witch commands respect. "Forgive me, Mistress. If the Grand Vizier is dead, then he was lucky to escape his punishment. He has been charged with the abduction of Princess Ilira. He was aided by her nurse." With this, he jerked his head at the woman.

"That's a lie!" cried the nurse, struggling in their grasp. "She'd be dead if we hadn't!"

"Silence her," said the lead soldier, and a sword was taken to her throat.

Mother swallowed. "That was disrespectful and unnecessary. This is a haven for preserving life, not ending it."

The leader reddened. "My apologies, Mistress. Our kingdom is in danger, and Prince Marun is overwrought."

"Prince Marun?" Mother asked. "Is the King not also bereaved?"

The soldiers looked uneasy. At last their leader said, "Alas, no. King Peront has been

murdered. 'Twas the Vizier who killed him."

"This is distressing," said Mother. "I shall take you to the princess at once."

Mother led them upstairs. I wondered that they did not see her in the garden, and ran outside to warn Ilira.

As I watched, she disappeared into the trees at the edge of the garden.

She had ventured into the woods.

All of Mother's warnings came back to me, but I could not heed them. A five-year-old child was in danger, and she was the Princess of the Realm. Frightened though I was, I dashed after her.

"Ilira! Stop!"

"No."

"But these woods are dangerous!" I exclaimed, finally catching up to her.

"They're safe. The winds told me so."

I was beginning to wonder about these winds. Anxious, I trotted beside the princess.

Crashes and shouting alerted us to the soldiers' approach. Mother's distraction had lasted but a minute, and she was still alive. I would know if she was not.

The princess ran, and I followed. Moments later, the trees broke; we stood in a clearing, the ground thick with moss. At the precise center was a flat rock, not unlike the one in Mother's garden.

Around us, I felt a dark energy. I could not call it evil—malevolent, perhaps—but it surrounded us, as if watching.

Ilira approached the rock.

"Wait!" I cried. "Don't!"

The presence I felt grew. As the soldiers crashed into the clearing, it swelled.

"Princess!" cried the lead soldier.

Ilira climbed upon the rock, and like a wave, the energy broke.

A great beast appeared between us, a scaled, tusked, red creature with horns half again its size. It towered over the men, and growled, baring its sharp teeth. Its cloven hooves thundered as it advanced upon them, and it waved its spiked tail like a mace. The beast roared, a noise so fearsome, it set my fur on end.

The men fled the clearing. Roaring again, the beast turned to us, then, bending low, it sniffed.

I growled, and moved to guard the princess. The beast paused. It ducked its head.

Then it vanished.

* * *

The soldiers left Porden toward evening, distraught. Mother fixed them up with strong tea that would keep them going through the night. She did not tell them that they would sleep for days afterward.

"What happened, Mother?" I asked her, when they were gone.

"The woods in these parts are the realm's hearth for earth magic, and sacred," she explained. "They do not welcome intruders."

"Yet I was spared."

"You meant to protect the child."

"And Ilira?"

"The princess is the rightful heir to the throne, and the most powerful Witch-child I have ever encountered. The land defended her by frightening them so. Had she been older, it would have done worse."

I recalled the great beast. The soldiers claimed that it had eaten the princess; they believed Ilira dead. They did not see the child curled upon the rock, fast asleep.

She was still there. When Mother found us, she left Ilira where she was; the woods, she told me, would protect her.

In the morning, we returned to the clearing. Mother approached the rock, and knelt in silent prayer. She glanced up, sharply, her eyes focused on a point beyond Ilira. She nodded, once, her expression grim.

When again she stood, I felt a ripple of power, and the princess woke.

"What did you promise?" I asked her, as Ilira rubbed her eyes.

"You'll see."

* * *

Light filled the room as the first part of the spell ended. Mother spoke seven words over her mixture and poured it into a small crystal bowl.

"Say your name three times, Ilira."

As the princess spoke, the thick liquid turned to white.

"Now, repeat after me: 'Thus I relinquish my name.'"

Obediently, Ilira said the words. Then, with Mother's help, she poured the liquid into a cauldron of cold water. A crystal formed, teardrop-shaped, and Mother plucked it from the water, stowing it in a velvet-lined chest. She turned to the now nameless child.

"By the Gods, I name you Janni."

"Janni," the girl repeated, thrice.

Mother made a symbol in the air, and the spell ended. "You are my daughter now, Janni." She bent down and embraced the former princess. "Fate has brought you to me, and here you shall stay."

* * *

Spring turned to summer, and the harvest grew. The gold rush trickled to a murmur, with the easiest streams mined to bare rock. In its place was a new, steadier industry: copper had been found in great quantities, and would support our town for years to come.

Two days before Midsummer, official word was sent through the kingdom: King Peront had been murdered, and Princess Ilira kidnapped. The princess was presumed dead. Peront's brother, Marun, now sits upon the throne.

After her name-change, Janni did not reveal herself immediately. Mother kept her inside for days before announcing her presence to our neighbors. The townspeople do not ask about her; it is the nature of the spell that Mother cast. All in Porden know only that she was distant kin, orphaned, and that Mother has taken her in. Should ever the king's men come once more to our home, Janni knows to hide herself. Even then, everyone knows that the missing princess was not a Witch.

In late autumn, Mother found Janni a kitten. The two were bonded at Midwinter, and since then I have overseen the training of my new sister, Pix. She is a little silly at times, but I

am fond of her nonetheless.

Now spring comes again. We do not know what will become of Janni. Her powers remain, but she is princess no longer. The land will not offer her the protection it did, unless she becomes Ilira once more. The realm has settled into a quiet, if uneasy peace, and Marun cannot be called a poor king.

Perhaps one day, years from now, Janni will reclaim what is rightfully hers. That is her decision, not ours. For now, Porden is a bustling town, home to a Witch and her beautiful, powerful daughter … and we all stay out of the woods.

The End

A second-generation fantasy reader, L.S. Taylor has been writing since before she can remember. Currently, she is a library technician in training, subject to bad cataloguing jokes and Boolean searching. Her work can be found at eleika.com.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 24

"Thought this was a Troll place," I said, with no translation.

Silence. I eased my grip on my wand and made a grand gesture with my free hand just for show. "Good is the guesting in this house," I said. My words rolled out in Trollish bursts of bullfrog thunder. "I thank you. Now I leave. I'll be near, though, should any of the Folk wish to speak privately."

I backed out of there. At the door, I paused long enough to tear down the tattered old flag they'd defiled. I still think it a tribute to the Kingdom's military reputation that I didn't wind up a platter of Trollish bar snacks.

The skiff rocked gently in the thick brown water. I flashed it for snakes, waited for the smoke to clear, and set off for camp amid a cloud of frustrated mosquitoes that could smell me but couldn't penetrate my pest shield. A fat yellow moon looked down, probably wondering why I was in such a hurry.

Trolls don't snicker. Honest men don't hide out in Troll bars. For the first time in two long years of mucking across a pestilence-ridden quagmire teeming with snakes and sneaky enclaves of truce-breaking Trolls, I had a lead.

Now, all I had to do was live through the night.

* * *

The coward moon set. The swamp was a mad cacophony of hoots and grunts and whistles and slithers. Something not too far away was knocking cypress trees flat as it ambled past.

Fifty feet away, my fetch crouched by a moldering knotwood stump and peered out into the dark. Every few minutes, I tugged at the fetch's spell, so that my double appeared to droop and start, as though dozing off but fighting it.

I waited and watched, wondering idly if my hair had that much grey. An hour passed. Then, just as my fetch dozed off again, a man—the man—stepped silently out of the reeds and leveled a wide black crossbow at my double's chest.

I mouthed a Word. Slumbering spells awoke and enveloped the real me. New spells crept stealthily about, quietly taking shape in the shadows. I bit my lip and waited for the crossbow to click and jerk, my arms tensing, killing word on my lips. I didn't think it would take him long to realize he'd murdered a fetch, and that I lurked somewhere nearby in the dark.

But the crossbow just shook. For ten long breaths he tried to hold it steady. I watched his face. He knew he had to shoot. He knew who I was and whose orders I followed and what I came to do—but in the end, he couldn't bring himself to loose the bolt.

I soothed my wand. He lowered his big Mauser crossbow. My fetch slumbered peacefully. After a moment, he turned and started back through the reeds, still quiet as a cloud, or a ghost.

"You're not much good at murder," I said aloud, through my fetch.

He stopped, froze, but didn't turn.

My fetch shook her head. "Imagine that. The Devil of Deften, overcome by his conscience at last. What's the matter, General? Couldn't find a Troll to do your killing for you, this time?"

He turned then, his face going white under the soot he'd smeared across his skin.

The fetch spoke again. "I arrest you, General Fenthon va Nerlon va Darl, in the name of the Kingdom and the Crown. The charge is desertion. And treason. And seven hundred and twelve counts of murder."

He dropped the Mauser. "I will not resist," he said, his voice barely audible above the night songs of the swamp. "Seven hundred and twelve?"

"The population of Defton's Mill," I replied. "Surely you remember—lovely little town, nice inn; you fed it to the Trolls during the War."

He shook his head, mute.

"You deny this?"

He shrugged, and let out a sigh that became a wet, hacking cough. "I've always denied it," he said, when the fit was done. "I betrayed no one. I had no traffic with Trolls during the war. I fought as best I could." The muscles on his neck grew taut. "Seven hundred and twelve?"

My fetch nodded. "More or less," she said. "It was hard to count the townsfolk, afterwards. Trolls are such messy eaters."

He tensed, as though struck, but said nothing. My fetch stood, brushing soggy bits of swamp off her damp pant-knees.

"Do you have anything to say? For the record?"

Beneath the soot, a little color crept back into his face. "I won't waste your time, soldier," he said, staring at the ground. "The truth can't save me now, any more than it could six years ago." He clenched his fists and spat. "I've lost my lands. Lost my House. Lost my name. I'm tired of hiding. Tired of running." He looked up, stared my fetch hard in her eyes. "Take me back. Let them hang me. Let them."

"Why didn't you shoot me, just now?" I asked, through the fetch. "You had me dead cold, and you know it."

"I am not a murderer," he said, wearily. "I came here to kill you. Damn near did." He swallowed, nearly broke into another coughing fit, went red in the face but held it back. "But I am not a murderer."

My fetch frowned. "If you spared me thinking that might sway a court to mercy, General," I said, "you're wasting your time. They plan to hang you, and if you get a trial at all, it'll be because they needed the time to build an unusually tall gallows."

He lifted a grey, bushy eyebrow. "I would keep such comments to myself, soldier," he said. "Talk like that won't be popular, back in the Kingdom."

"We're a long way from Regent Street," I said. "And the War was done six years ago. Not long enough ago for you, maybe, but long enough for some. Another year or two, and they'd write you off as dead and stop looking for you. I might be the last one they'd have sent."

"Why tell me this?" he said.

I shrugged. The fetch mirrored me. "Just making conversation, General," I said. "Might as well get to know each other. It's a long trip, north up the Slow."

He spat and shook his head. "Sorcerers. Crazy, the lot of you." He toed his fallen crossbow. "What makes you think I won't change my mind about a bit of murder?"

"What makes you think you'll live if you do?" I made the fetch grin. "You're dangerous, General. So am I. But try if you want. Maybe you'll get lucky. Maybe you'll walk away. But when I don't report, they'll send someone else. Someone worse. And so on, until you meet your match or run yourself to death."

The swamp howled and shrieked and plopped and bellowed.

The General just stood there, bathed in sweat, enveloped in a cloud of greedy mosquitoes testing his tattered pest shields.

My fetch shrugged. "Think it over," I said. "I've been on your trail two years now. I can wait an hour, or two."

"Two years? For me?"

"That's right, General. Two years. My predecessor also spent two years on you. The

Regent wants your head, General." My fetch chuckled. "My predecessor hinted privately once that the Regent's interest in you isn't necessarily born of a public-minded zeal to see the traitor of Defton's Mill punished. My predecessor was beginning to believe that something else was motivating the Kingdom, this time."

The man kept his face blank. "Your predecessor is given to flights of fancy, is she not?" he asked.

"Not since she walked into that alley in Gault," I said. "Crime is such a problem in the New Cities, these days. They'll kill you for a pair of coppers, I'm told. Or for talking too much."

"You take heed of that, soldier," said the General. "You take heed. Same thing might happen to you."

I grinned. "It might. It just might. But I'm careful with my theories, General. Especially my theories about the Regency, and why it wants you dead."

He glared. I could almost see him measuring the distance to his Mauser, wondering if he could drop and roll and get off a shot.

"They say you met secretly with a Troll scout, general. They say you traded the town for your safety. They say you watched while they slipped through the walls one night, and then you ran away. It's a good story. It's even plausible, to a point. And since—and not many people know this, General—and since the only other survivor turns out to be the new Regent's second son, who will dare to question it?"

"Shut up, soldier," rasped the General.

My fetch frowned, gestured with a raised forefinger. "Say, for instance, word got around that it wasn't you who fed Defton's Mill to the Trolls. Say it was a certain frightened, young lieutenant who never dreamed he'd ever wind up being heir to the Regent's crown." My fetch began to pace, wagging her finger like a school-master. "The Regency that arose after the War is still fragile. A scandal like this—well, it might topple, General. Perhaps you are aware we've been on the brink of civil war since practically the eve of the Truce?"

"Nonsense," he said, but he had to lick dry lips to get the word out.

My fetch shook her head. "You had a Troll-talk spell. The only one, as far as anyone knew. Did you know the lieutenant had one, too?"

"Nonsense," he repeated.

"Not at all," I said. "When did you figure it out?"

"You're insane," he said.

"Hardly," I replied, stopping the fetch ten feet from the man. "One of you made a deal with the Trolls, General. I don't believe it was you, now." My fetch smiled. "You're just no damned good at murder."

He cursed and dived for his Mauser. It spun away from his hand, vanished in the reeds. He leaped to his feet, reached for a short Vendish sword, then a long needle-bladed dagger, then what looked like a blowgun.

All fled his grasp, spun away into the hot wet night.

"Calm down, General," I said, when he was done. "I don't want a civil war in the Kingdom any more than you do."

He glared.

"That's what's kept you in the swamps, isn't it?" I said. "Fear that the truth might finally get out? Fear that someone would put you to the question, and get an answer they never expected, and couldn't conceal? Fear that the Kingdom would be trading one big war for a dozen smaller ones?"

He flexed his empty hands, stared off after his lost arsenal. "You're too smart for your own good, soldier," he muttered. "You really think the Regency will let you submit your report and just walk away? From this?"

"I'm counting on it," I said. "After all, General, if you're dead and gone none of it really matters any more, does it?"

He shook his head. "I'm not dead, soldier," he said, slipping into a fighter's stance. "Not yet."

The fighter's stance was just a feint. He let fly a spell, standard Army issue mayhem with the addition of a thermal element common in the East during the last days of the war. Ten years ago it might have knocked me flat. As it was, I merely brushed it aside like a wind-drifting cobweb.

"Ah, but you've been dead for a year," I said. "Dead and buried. It'll say so in my report, General. And we both know official Kingdom field reports never lie."

My decoy smiled. She lifted her wand, and it flickered, and the General's failing pest shield was rewoven, and his failing nightsight spell was rekindled. His weapons sailed back to land at his feet.

"A gift from the Kingdom, General," I said. "The last. And woefully insufficient. But I can't waste any more effort on dead soldiers or old wars, now can I?"

He just stared. The bugs and the crocks and the mudsharks sang on, unheeding.

I tugged at fetch-spells. She waved, and snapped her fingers, and vanished.

The General stared, open-mouthed. "Damned sorcerers," he said, and he spat. "Crazy, the lot of you."

He stooped, gathered his arsenal. Then he turned, took two steps, stopped and turned again. For a long time he peered about into the swamp, seeing the towering cypresses and the twisted knotwoods and the moldering sump-canes he'd taken exile among. Something like a weary smile caught his face.

He threw a single, quick salute into the night.

Then he was gone.

Peace still holds, in the Kingdom. There are those who attribute this peace to the fledgling Regency's wisdom and statecraft.

Wisdom and statecraft.

Hell.

Two of us, at least, know better.

The End

Frank Tuttle's stories have appeared in Weird Tales, Abyss&Apex, and Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine. Frank resides in Mississippi, where he counsels rambunctious dogs and runs ornery computers, and vice versa.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards